

WILD WEST

WEEKLY

A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES ETC. OF WESTERN LIFE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Application made for Second Class Entry at the N. Y. Post Office.

No. 209.

NEW YORK, OCTOBER 19, 1906.

Price 5 Cents.

YOUNG WILD WEST AND THE PRAIRIE PIRATES; OR, THE FIGHT FOR THE BOX OF GOLD.

BY AN OLD SCOUT.



The leader of the Prairie Pirates laughed derisively as Wild lifted the lid of the box. "I told you so!" he cried. "You've got me, but you ain't got the gold." Wild saw that the box was filled with stones.

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YOUNG WILD WEST and the PRAIRIE PIRATES

OR,

The Fight For the Box of Gold

BY AN OLD SCOUT.

CHAPTER I.

THE BOX OF GOLD.

It was a warm afternoon in September. The rolling prairie of western Nebraska stretched out as far as the eye could see.

Over a cattle trail that led to the northeast a heavy wagon drawn by six mules was slowly making its way.

Four men rode on horseback, two on either side of the wagon, and to look at them one would be apt to think that there was something on the wagon that needed guarding.

And such was really the case, though the horsemen might a great deal better have kept further from it, and acted more indifferent.

In that wagon, covered with blankets and packages of provisions, was a box of gold.

It seemed a queer place for a box of gold to be, but the man who owned it was an eccentric fellow, and he had sworn to take it overland to his home in Omaha.

Six months before the opening of our story Jasper Lake, of Omaha, Nebraska, had landed in a wild part of central Colorado, and had struck it rich.

He had started out prospecting, and had been lucky right at the start, for he struck a pocket that contained virgin gold.

Lake's outfit, when he found the pocket, was nothing much to speak of.

A very lame and bony horse, a pick and shovel, a couple

of pans, a coffee-pot and frying-pan, together with a couple of blankets, was about all there was to it.

Of course, the man was armed, but he only had a few rounds of cartridges left, so when he struck the pocket he was really what might be called in a bad way.

By this we mean that it would not be good policy for him to leave the spot to stock up with ammunition and grub; while if he remained there he would not be able to hold his find against a ruffianly gang should they happen along.

Lake decided to stay there for a while, and make the best of it.

He dug out the gold, washed it in the brook that ran within a few yards of the pocket, and then stored it in a cave close by.

He used up his ammunition in shooting game, which was plentiful, but in a few days he found himself without salt to season the meat he was living solely upon.

With the greed for gold strong upon him, he could not make up his mind to leave the spot, and it is quite likely that if three other prospectors—men who were strictly honest and fair—had not come along, well stocked with provisions and ammunition, just about that time, Jasper Lake would have died there.

There were other deposits near by, besides the pocket Lake had discovered, and when he had come to the conclusion that he could trust the strangers, he told them that they would have no trouble in getting rich there.

They struck in at work, and the dirt panned out so well that in less than a week the newcomers made up their

minds that they had struck the richest gold-bearing region in all Colorado.

In a month's time more men came to the place, and then a mining camp sprang up.

Lake made up his mind to get rid of some of the gold he had mined, so, in conjunction with the four prospectors, whom he had taken in as partners now, he began shipping the dust to the nearest town and depositing the money in a Denver bank.

"There's one thing I'm goin' to do," Lake kept telling his partners, "an' that is to take a big box of gold home with me. I was laughed at by my relatives an' friends when I set out fur Colorady to git rich. They all allowed that all ther gold I'd bring home with me I could put in my eye. I'm worth more'n fifty thousand in cold cash, an' I want ter take a box of gold home, jest ter show 'em that they was ther fools, an' not me. I'm goin' ter take ther gold all ther way in a mule-wagon, too!"

He said this so many times, and it appeared to be his one ambition, that the four men made up their minds to help him carry it out.

The pocket gave out after a while, and then the four men declared that they would ride overland to Omaha with him.

As they all hailed from further east than that, they were not putting themselves out of the way, only in the time they were losing in not traveling by railroad.

Lake finally bought the kind of wagon he wanted, and the mules to pull it.

He decided to be the driver himself, so one rainy night the outfit left the little mining camp, which was now fast becoming deserted, owing to the fact that the deposits were growing scarcer and scarcer.

Lake and his companions had made the journey through the eastern half of Colorado without mishap, and now we find them them on the rolling prairies of Nebraska, just about half-way to their destination.

At the time of which we write it was naught but a fool-hardy undertaking to convey a box of gold that distance, with only five men to guard it.

It would be now, for that matter; but in those times there were not so many towns and villages in that part of the country as there are now, though it was not a great many years ago, at that.

The little party of five had crossed the great railroad track that ran through the State of Nebraska, and were heading for the Platte river.

As they had a camping outfit in the wagon, they had refused to stop at any of the ranches they had passed since reaching the prairie.

Jasper Lake did not want anybody to get an inkling of what was in the iron-bound box he had in the wagon.

"Well, boys," he remarked, as he looked at the declining sun, "I reckon we've coverd ther worst half of the distance. I'm awful glad I made up my mind to do this! I'll jest give ther folks ther biggest surprise they ever had in their lives, I will! I'll show 'em that I ain't ther

fool they thought I was. When they see that box of gold I reckon they'll open their eyes."

"I reckon they will," answered one of the men, who had begun to be almost as much interested in the thing as was Lake. "I want ter be right with yer when yer meet your relations an' friends, blamed if I don't."

This man bore the name of Hooley. He was a good fellow, and a pretty nervy sort of a man.

The others were hard fellows, not much lacking when it came to taking care of themselves, but they lacked the style of leadership, and, consequently, what Lake and Hooley said always went with them.

The wagon kept on over the cattle trail, and soon the shining waters of the Platte could be seen in the distance.

But the sun was rapidly nearing the line of the Western horizon now, and the five travelers knew that they must get a hustle on them if they wanted to reach the river before darkness overtook them.

"Do yer think we'll make it, pard?" asked one of the men, addressing Hooley, as the mules picked themselves at the crack of Lake's whip, and got on a faster trot.

"I reckon so," was the reply. "I hope we do, 'cause what little water we've got in ther barrel is putty bad. There's plenty in that river ahead—plenty fur drinkin' an' cookin' purposes, an' fur ther live stock; and plenty ter wash in."

They kept on moving, and just as they were about three miles from the river one of the men happened to look behind at the trail they had been following.

He was not so very much surprised when he saw several horsemen coming along at a swift pace, for it was a cattle trail, and anybody had the privilege of following it.

But he called the attention of his partners to it, and then they all took a look.

"Cowboys, I reckon," observed Hooley.

"Might be robbers," Jasper Lane suggested, as he cast a glance at the spot where the box of gold was hidden under the blankets in the wagon.

"I reckon we won't meet no robbers in ther State of Nebrasky, not if we didn't meet any in Colorady," spoke up the man in the rear.

"Well, I hope they ain't robbers," said Lake. "There's nine of 'em, an' if they should take a notion ter attack us they could have it about their own way, I s'pose."

The nine mounted men rapidly gained on them, and before they were at the bank of the river they had been so anxious to reach they came up.

The sun was just sinking, and a refreshing breeze came from the south.

"Hello, strangers!" called out the leader of the party, a rascally looking man of perhaps fifty. "Which way are yer bound?"

"To Omaha," answered Lake, looking just the least bit uneasy.

"Is travelin' with mules cheaper than payin' freight?"

queried the man, and then he winked at his followers and broke into a laugh.

"I don't know as it is cheap," answered Lake, growing more uneasy than ever. "A man sometimes takes a queer notion, yer know. I jest got it in my head that I'd go home this way."

"Did ther four galoots with yer make up their minds ter go this way, too?"

"They sartinly did."

The nine men had now moved up until they about had the mules and the wagon surrounded.

"Where are you fellers goin'?" Lake ventured to ask, as he cracked the whip at the leaders to get them along a little faster.

"Oh, not very far. I guess we've gone far enough now, eh, boys?"

"I reckon so!" came the answer from two or three of them at one time.

"Let's stop here, then."

As he said this the rascally looking leader suddenly whipped out his revolver, and pointing it at Lake, exclaimed:

"Jest stop ther mules, will yer? We want that box of gold!"

The returning miner uttered a cry as though he had been stung.

It was hardly possible to think that after they had got that far with the treasure box that they were to lose it!

But the sardonic grin on the face of the man told plainly that such was the case.

"You don't know who we are, I reckon," he went on to say, as he looked around and saw that his companions had covered the four men on horseback, and that they were all at a halt. "We're what they call ther Prairie Pirates! We are out fur business right along. Yer must be putty thick, or else you'd know that we've been follerin' yer fur two days ter find out what yer had on ther wagon. Last night I jest crept up ter your camp, an' I was lucky enough ter hear yer talkin' about ther box of gold yer had. That box of gold is goin' ter be ours now. We're very fond of gold, but we don't believe in diggin' it out of ther ground. Our motto is ter git it away from ther galoots what does ther diggin'—see?"

The five travelers knew that they were in for it.

The nine men were all desperadoes, if appearances went for anything, and as they sat in their saddles, ready to shoot them down, there was nothing to do but to hold up their hands and allow themselves to be relieved of their weapons.

Jasper Lake burst into tears.

He cried like a child, for his scheme to surprise his relatives and friends had been spoiled, and he was to lose the box of gold, after all the trouble he had taken.

He wept for a few minutes, and then he began to plead with the villains, as they were rummaging through the contents of the wagon.

But it was of no avail.

The Prairie Pirates were as hard-hearted as they could well be, and they merely laughed at the man.

Lake's four companions sat on their horses, the picture of dismay.

They were disarmed, and consequently at the mercy of the villains.

Two of the men guarded them, while the rest unearthed the treasure in the wagon.

There was a lock on the iron-bound box, and it was quite natural that the Prairie Pirates should think that the man who took on so badly had the key.

The leader quietly pushed the muzzle of his six-shooter against the forehead of Lake and said:

"If yer want ter live ter git ter ther river over there jest hand over ther key to ther box of gold, you snivellin' galoot!"

Lake was only human, after all.

The cold steel muzzle of the revolver pressing against his forehead made him act, and act quickly.

He pulled the key from his pocket and handed it over.

"Take it!" he exclaimed. "I hope the gold will never do you any good, though!"

"Your hopin' that way won't make it," was the tantalizing retort. "I reckon we kin spend ther dust jest as well as you an' ther other galoots kin."

Then he unlocked the box and had a look at the contents.

"Boys, what do yer think of that!" he cried. "If this ain't a mighty fine haul my name ain't Whistlin' Jerry, an' I ain't ther leader of ther Prairie Pirates!"

"Whew!"

"Great ginger!"

"Ain't that fine!"

"We're in luck!"

These and other similar exclamations went up from the villainous band.

"How much do yer think is there, Jerry?" asked one.

"There's all of forty thousand dollars' worth of ther yaller metal, if not more," was the reply.

"That's ther best haul we've made since we ripped in ter the mail-stage coach last week, then," spoke up another.

"Oh, I reckon it ain't enough ter make a galoot go off ther handle," observed the leader. "Now that we've got ther box, we've got ter take ther wagon ter carry it to our hang-out, boys. But we don't want six mules ter pull it. That's too many. We'll let ther galoot what was drivin' have two of ther mules. He kin ride both of 'em at one time if he feels like doin' a circus act afore he gits ter a settlement, which he won't find short of fifty miles from here, I reckon. By that time we'll be at our snug headquarters, arrangin' ter send off ther gold an' convertin' it inter cold cash. Ha, ha, ha!"

As Jerry laughed the rest joined in, and there was quite a burst of mirth out there on the lonesome prairie.

The villains went right at work now.

Whistling Jerry locked the box and put the key in his pocket.

Two of the mules were taken from the wagon and left standing.

Then the leader called on a man named Jack to get into the wagon and do the driving.

"You galoots kin have one rifle an' your knives," he said to the five travelers. "I'll let yer have some of ther grub an' your fryin'-pan an' coffee-pot, too. But let me tell yer somethin'! Don't ever try ter follow us an' think you've got a chance ter git back ther box of gold! If yer do you'll be dead men afore yer know what struck yer! Ther Prairie Pirates ain't no spring chickens, an' they don't think no more of killin' a human galoot than they do a coyote! Chuck what stuff out that yer think they might want putty bad, Jack, an' then we'll go on."

Jack obeyed. He was quite liberal with the provisions, too, which was a wonder.

Then, with a single rifle and less than a dozen cartridges in their possession, the five returning miners watched the villains go off with the wagon containing the box of gold.

It was certainly the hardest kind of luck that they had met with, but to attempt to recover the gold would mean sure death for them, and they knew it.

CHAPTER II.

YOUNG WILD WEST AND HIS FRIENDS APPEAR ON THE SCENE.

Jasper Lake watched the departing Prairie Pirates for fully ten minutes without saying a word to his companions.

They all felt deeply for him, for he had talked so much about the surprise he was going to give to the folks when he came back home with the box of gold.

Finally Hooley stepped over to him and touched him on the shoulder.

"Never mind, Jasper," he said, in a kindly voice. "There may come a way to get that gold back. Who can tell? And if yer never did git it back you've got plenty of money in ther bank at Denver. Jest take it a bit cool, won't yer? Fur my part, I feel putty sartin that we'll git that box of gold back. Them robbers ain't goin' ter take it ter any town, that's sartin. By what they said their hangout ain't as much as fifty miles from here. Jest brighten up. We ain't half as bad off as we might be. I say that we'd better ride on ter ther river, an' then go inter camp. We'll eat somethin', an' then we'll talk it over."

"All right, Hooley!" exclaimed Lake, forcing a smile. "What you say puts new life in me. We'll do jest as you say."

Sighs of relief came from the others in the party.

They were glad to see that Lake had brightened up somewhat.

Lake got astride of one of the mules, with a grimace.

Then he took the other by the halter, and rode for the river with his friends.

It was now getting dark, and the villains who had robbed them could no longer be seen.

When they reached the river bank Hooley pointed to a little grove of cottonwoods and said:

"I reckon we'd better ride down there. I always like ter camp among trees if I kin. It's putty open right here. It ain't likely that we'll be bothered by any more Prairie Pirates, but it's jest as well ter have somethin' like cover, in case somethin' does go wrong."

"That's right," nodded the miner.

The cottonwoods were less than half a mile distance, so they soon reached them.

The villains had been liberal in giving them provisions from their own store, as has been stated.

They had bacon, flour, potatoes, salt and pepper, and a haunch of juicy venison from a young buck that had been shot that morning.

Coffee, too, they had, so there was nothing to complain of as far as eating was concerned.

Each had their knives, and by mutual consent Hooley was allowed to keep the one rifle and cartridges that fitted it.

They all turned to, and the horses were tethered where they could get both grass and water, and then a fire was started.

The four friends of the down-hearted man insisted that he sit down until they got the supper ready, and he gave in to them.

Hooley whistled merrily as the bacon sizzled in the frying-pan, and the coffee steamed away in the pot that hung over the fire.

"There ain't no use in cryin' over spilled milk," he said, as he ceased for a moment and looked at Lake. "But you kin jest bet that yer ain't seen ther last of that box of gold, Jasper!"

"I hope you are right on that," was the reply. "I hate to go back home without it, since I started from ther diggin's with it."

"Oh, you'll git it agin, see if yer don't! Somethin' will turn up ter help us git after them Prairie Pirates, as they call themselves. It won't hardly do ter go after 'em ther way we are now, with only one rifle ter put up a fight with."

"We'll stay here till morning, an' then we'll try an' find someone ter help us."

Lake resigned himself to this, and when the supper was cooked a little later he ate as heartily as any of them.

They kept the fire burning after they had eaten, because it gave a more cheerful aspect to their little camp.

It was about two hours after they arrived at the little grove of cottonwood trees that they heard the sounds made by horses.

They listened in alarm, for it was not strange that they should think the Prairie Pirates were coming back.

But none of the men had much money with them, their wealth all being deposited in the bank at Denver.

They had blank draughts, though, and if the robbers thought of it they might force them to draw up checks on the bank for all they had.

Anxiously they waited for the horsemen they knew were coming to appear.

"There ain't no use ter put up any fight," said one of the men, as he saw Hooley tighten his grip on the rifle.

"I know it," was the reply. "But yer don't s'pose I'm goin' ter see any of us shot down without shootin' back, do yer?"

The campfire was burning rather dimly now—in fact, there were naught but coals there now, the blaze having died out for the want of something to feed on.

But the red glare of the coals could be seen quite a long distance, and that was what attracted those who were approaching.

"Hello, strangers!"

It was a cheery voice that called out the salutation, and the instant they heard it the five men brightened up.

That voice did not belong to one of the Prairie Pirates, and they knew it.

"Hello!" answered Jasper Lake, springing to his feet, and looking eagerly through the gloom.

Then up in front of the dying fire rode a dashing looking boy with a wealth of long chestnut hair hanging down over his shoulders.

He was mounted on a beautiful sorrel stallion that stood as stately before the five victims of the Prairie Pirates as any trained circus steed might have done.

"I'm awful glad ter see yer, young feller!" exclaimed Lake, the tone of his voice showing plainly that he meant what he said. "How many is with yer?"

"There is eight of us altogether," was the reply. "We happened to see your campfire, so we thought we would ride over here and find out who you were. We are looking for some men, but you are not the ones."

"Oh, how I wish yer had come along jest afore sunset!" cried Lake, shaking his head. "We was robbed by a gang what called themselves ther Prairie Pirates. They took my box of gold!"

The dashing looking boy on the sorrel stallion gave a start.

"The Prairie Pirates, you say?" he observed, coolly.

"Yes, that's what they said they was. Say, young feller, won't you an' your friends help me ter git back my box of gold?"

"You bet we will!" was the quick reply; and then, turning in the saddle, the boy called out:

"Come on; all hands!"

The first to appear was a tall, straight man, with long black hair and flowing mustache. He was mounted on a powerful bay.

Then three females appeared, all mounted on fine-looking steeds.

Two of them were mere girls in their teens, and the other had passed twenty.

The next of the party to appear was a boy, and right behind him came two typical Chinamen leading pack-horses.

That made up the eight.

Lake and his partners were surprised when they saw the girls in the party.

They figured it out quickly that there were only three in it who were capable of fighting such a gang as the Prairie Pirates.

They did not count the two Celestials, for they had never seen much fighting done by people of their race.

The dashing looking boy with the long hair promptly dismounted.

Then he introduced himself and his friends.

Right here we will state that he was no other than Young Wild West, the recognized champion Deadshot of the West, wealthy young mine-owner, and known by his friends as the Prince of the Saddle.

With him were his two partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart; Cheyenne Charlie's wife, Anna; the misses, Arietta Murdock and Eloise Gardner, who were the sweethearts of Young Wild West and Jim Dart; and the Chinese servants of the party, Hop Wah and Wing Wah.

The majority of our readers know all about these characters, but for the benefit of those who do not we will state that Young Wild West was the most dashing young hero of the Wild West that has ever been written of, and that his two partners were true to the core.

Cheyenne Charlie had served several years as government scout, and he had been in more fights with redskins and dangerous wild animals than he could remember.

Jim Dart, like Young Wild West, had been born and reared in the wildest part of the West, so they had simply grown up to almost live in the saddle and shoot accurately.

Fear was a thing that Young Wild West scarcely knew. He had heard of the word, of course, but he never flinched in times of great danger, always remaining as cool as an iceberg.

It was his coolness and daring, added to his generous disposition, that made him what he was—a born leader!

He was always practicing difficult and fancy shots, so it was easy for him to astonish a crowd whenever he felt disposed to show what he could do in that line.

It was no wonder, then, that he had won the title of Champion Deadshot of the West.

Of the girls, Arietta was the only one who had been born and reared in the West. She was a beautiful blonde, and was as cool and daring as any girl who had ever handled a rifle or revolver.

Anna and Eloise had been long enough in the West to become accustomed to its ways, and they had traveled around so much through the most dangerous sections that they were getting quite used to it, and, like the rest of the

party, they never felt quite satisfied unless they met with stirring adventures continually.

Wing Wah was just a plain, ordinary cook, who always did as he was told. His brother Hop was quite different from him, however.

He was one of the shrewdest of his race. He was a sleight-of-hand performer, knew all the tricks of a professional gambler, did not have much regard for the truth at certain times, and was a great lover of "tanglefoot," as he called the bad whisky sold at the mining camps and settlements.

After finding out who the strangers were Jasper Lake introduced his four companions.

Then he soon told them all that had taken place just before sunset.

He related how he had started from the Colorado mining camp with the box of gold, and why he undertook such a risky journey, with only four men to help him guard the treasure.

Cheyenne Charlie laughed and shook his head.

"Yer oughter knowed better," he said. "Any gang of outlaws what seen six mules draggin' a wagon along would be apt ter think that there was somethin' in it that was a little extra like. They'd want ter investigate, sure! I'm sorry that yer was foolish enough ter start ter git ther box of gold ter Omaha that way, but I reckon Wild might find a way ter git it back fur yer."

Lake uttered an exclamation of joy when he heard this.

"Do you think you can do anything?" he said, turning to our hero. "You're only a boy, I know, but you're as big as ther average man, an' by ther looks of yer, I would think that you could fight like greased lightnin'! What do yer think about it, Young Wild West?"

"Well, I think we will be able to get the box of gold away from the gang that calls itself the Prairie Pirates," was the calm reply from the boy.

"Yer do think that way?" spoke up Hooley, his eyes sparkling with the delight he felt.

"Yes. The fact is that we are looking for this same gang. We have been following them, but when it got dark to-night we lost the trail. We never heard of them until the day before yesterday, and when we heard that the Prairie Pirates had robbed a stage-coach and made a pretty big haul, we thought we would hunt them up. It is a way we have to hunt down such villains. We can't seem to help it, and though we were compelled to go considerable out of our way, we followed the trail of the villains, after we once struck it. We are bound for Champion ranch, which is about a hundred miles farther up the river."

"Well, jest make yourselves at home here, won't yer? Yer must be sorter tired, if you've been goin' all day."

"Well, we have been going all day, that's a fact. We halted an hour before sunset to have supper and give the horses a rest. Then, when it got dark, we started out again. We had an idea that we'd head for our ranch, and get far enough to-night to make it an easy day's journey

for the balance of the way to-morrow. But we didn't intend to give up looking for the Prairie Pirates; we were going out from the ranch to hunt them up. Since we have struck you folks, and you have lost a box of gold, we will stop right here till morning, and then we'll help you get the gold back. The girls will go along and do their share of the fighting, if there is any."

"An' ther two heathen Chinees might be of a little use, too," nodded Lake, approvingly, for he now felt that Young Wild West and his two partners were perfectly capable of taking care of at least three of the nine Prairie Pirates.

"Hop, you and Wing get a hustle on yourselves, and get the tents up!" exclaimed the dashing young deadshot, as he leaned his rifle against a tree and proceeded to help Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart unload the pack-horses.

Then all hands turned to and helped them, and in a short time they were comfortably located with the five miners.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRAIRIE PIRATES AT THEIR RETREAT.

We will now follow the villains who called themselves the Prairie Pirates.

The fact was that this band of men had become quite a scourge to the part of the country located near the boundary line between the States of Colorado and Nebraska.

Though the country was very thinly populated there—settlements and little towns being as much as fifty miles apart in some cases—there were trails over which stage-coaches made their way.

It was these trails that the gang of nine men haunted, plying their nefarious business whenever the opportunity afforded, and always coming out best.

They had been keeping up this business for nearly three months when our story opens, and though a price had been put upon the heads of Whistling Jerry and his gang by the sheriffs of three or four counties, he could still laugh at them.

The haul they had made when they got the box of gold was a pleasant surprise to them.

As the villainous leader told the victims of the robbery, he had heard them talking about what was in the mule wagon the night before at their camp.

Then it was easy for them to follow the wagon and horsemen, and when the proper time came, take possession of their effects.

Of course, they wanted to get them far away from a settlement or town as possible before they made the attack, and this they did, meeting with great success, as has been described.

The villains were in high glee, as might be supposed, for a big box of gold was quite a prize.

"Jerry," said the fellow called Jack, as they rode along, "this are what I call putty fine, ain't it? You said when yer first catched a glimpse of them five galoots that there was somethin' suspicious about 'em. But you, nor none of us, thought we was goin' ter strike a box of gold!"

"That's right, Jack," answered Whistling Jerry. "No one would have thought there was a box of gold in ther wagon; but I was quite sartin, by ther way ther galoots acted, that there was somethin' there they didn't want nobody ter know of. I told yer all that I was goin' ter find out, an' I did."

"Hooray fur Whistlin' Jerry, ther King Pin of ther Prairie Pirates!" cried one of the members of the gang.

They all gave a cheer then, and their voices echoed over the plains.

"It'll take us a good two hours ter git to our hangout, 'cause these here mules travels putty slow," said Jerry, a few minutes later. "We've been jest about fifteen minutes now, an' we ain't made more'n two miles. Git a faster gait on ther mules, Jack."

"All right," was the reply, and by the use of the long whip Jack did get the tired animals going a little faster.

They kept on, and it was nearly two hours after dark when they finally came to a break in the level country that formed the prairie.

A long ridge that was nearly a hundred feet above the level of the rolling plain in some places ran southward to the Colorado line, and joined the foot-hills of the Rockies.

As the villains came to this they entered the mouth of a gulch and followed its course through the center of the ridge.

On the side of the little stream they were following the way was almost entirely of rocky deposits.

The wheels of the big wagon slipped in places, and the mules had all they could do to keep on their feet at times.

"They'll have hard work findin' our trail, if anyone tries ter find us in here," said Whistling Jerry, with a grin. "I reckon it won't be safe fur a gang ter foller us, even if they could find ther trail, 'cause we've got things rigged too nice ter be took."

"It would take a troop of soldiers ter git us out of our retreat," Jack answered, as he guided the four mules with considerable skill over the dangerous places. "But when it gits as bad as all that I reckon it'll be time fur us ter change our quarters, anyhow."

"It sartinly will," spoke up one of the others.

The party proceeded about a mile up the gulch, and presently came to a spot where it narrowed down in the form of a pass, with the stream occupying the whole of it.

"Do yer think yer kin git through with ther wagon, Jack?" Jerry asked.

"Sartin," was the reply. "I reckon I kin take four mules an' a wagon where anyone else kin. I was raised among mules, an' I ought ter know somethin' about ther handlin' of 'em."

"Everyone to his kind," observed a man named Hobson, with a laugh.

"Yer don't mean that I'm a mule, too, do yer?" asked the driver.

"Yer seem ter think that I meant that, Jack," came the retort.

"Well, if I'm a mule you're a jackass!"

"All right. I was only in fun."

"You're always tryin' ter be funny, it seems. Some of these times you'll git inter trouble from it."

They all laughed at Jack now, for they could see that he was a bit mad at being compared with a mule.

The driver dropped it then.

"Go on through, all hands," he said. "I'll fetch ther blamed old wagon through."

Whistling Jerry promptly lighted a lantern that he took from the wagon, and remained still in the saddle.

When the rest of the horsemen had gone through, taking Jack's horse with them, he rode through the shallow stream after them, holding the lantern for Jack to see the way to drive.

But there was only one way to drive, for the space was not more than a couple of feet wider than the wagon.

There was a floundering as the mules slipped on the hard, smooth bottom, and then the wagon rolled on through the narrow gut.

The gulch widened out then, and a dense grove of pines and stunted oaks was right before them.

"Here we are, boys!" exclaimed the leader of the Prairie Pirates. "I'm mighty glad of it, fur it's been what I calls tiresome, ridin' along at sich a slow gait. Jest run ther blamed wagon among ther trees till she gits jammed, an' then yer kin unhitch ther mules an' turn 'em loose. One of yer git off your horse an' lower ther log, so's they won't git out an' go back."

Jack put the whip on the tired mules, and they jumped ahead through the trees.

But they did not go far before the wagon jammed so it could not be budged.

Then, while the animals were being unhitched, Hobson dismounted and went back to the narrow opening between the rocks.

It was dark there, but he knew just where to go and what to do.

He found a rope tied to a tree, and in less than a minute he had untied it.

Then he lowered the butt of a dead tree until it lay directly across the gut, with the water flowing beneath it at a distance of two or three feet.

"Ther gate is shet, cap," he said, as he went back to where the rest had dismounted.

"Good!" came the reply. "Now I reckon we kin take it easy. As we didn't have much of a supper, on account of keepin' after ther miners, I reckon I'll have somethin' ter eat. Where's ther infernal Chinee, anyhow? Asleep, most likely!"

At that instant a piping voice exclaimed from the mouth of a cave near at hand:

"Me light here, cappee!"

"Oh, you're awake, are yer? Well, jest git some coffee ready, an' brile some meat. I'm mighty hungry."

"Allee light, cappee."

That the Chinaman had prepared everything to start a fire at a moment's notice was evident, for the next minute a blaze showed through the undergrowth.

The outlaw gang turned their horses loose, and then, with Whistling Jerry leading them with the lighted lantern in his hand, they went to the cave.

The cave was a wide-mouthed one, and amply large enough to accommodate them all for sleeping purposes.

It was well supplied with beds and bedding and odd bits of furniture, showing that the villains had at some time raided an emigrant wagon and taken the furniture it contained to their retreat.

"High Low," said Whistling Jerry, as he walked to the spot where the Celestial was working over the fire he had started, "you've got some of that bear meat handy, I reckon?"

"Me gottee light here, cappee," was the reply.

"All right. Cook it fine, an' then I'll give yer what money's coming ter yer. I told yer we would pay yer a hundred dollars a month, which is more money than any heathen ever earned in his life, an' I'm goin' ter do it. All you've got ter do is ter stick ter us, an' keep your mouth closed if anyone should ever find this place when we ain't here, an' you'll be a rich heathen afore yer know it."

"High Low, he know velly goodee," was the reply.

The Chinaman was probably sixty years of age, and as he had been in the United States a dozen years or more, he knew pretty well what to do when in the employ of a gang of villains.

It mattered not what they did, so long as they treated him half decent, and paid him his salary.

High Low meant to go back to China some day.

He wanted money enough to enable him to live without work when he got there.

Like a great many of his race who have lived in the mining districts of the West, the Celestial was a pretty good cook.

He was like Wing in that respect, but very unlike him in others, since Wing was honest and he was far from it.

High Low, as the Prairie Pirates called him, was not long in getting a fairly decent meal ready for them.

As he had everything ready, and was expecting that he would have to do it, he was not doing anything more than might be looked for.

The nine villains, though they had all eaten something an hour before sunset, sat down in the cave and ate heartily.

"Now, then, boys," remarked the leader, as he lighted a cigar, "I reckon we'll see about gittin' that box of gold out of ther wagon."

"It's blamed heavy, I reckon," one of the men ventured.

"Sartin. Gold is always heavy. Ther purer it is ther

heavier it is," was the reply. "I know that much about it, an' I also know that it is a very valuable metal."

Whistling Jerry began to whistle then, for he had a way of breaking out that way now and then, and hence his nickname.

When he whistled his hearers were supposed to laugh, or smile, anyhow, and the eight men who placed so much confidence in him promptly nodded and laughed.

This pleased the villain immensely.

"Well, come on," said he, and out they went to the wagon.

Two of them carried lanterns, so they would know what they were doing.

"Did yer rig ther rope, so ther bell will ring in ther cave if anyone happens ter come an' try ter climb over ther dead tree?" Jack asked.

"No! didn't yer do it yourself when yer come in?" retorted Jerry.

"I furgot it; I'll go an' do it now."

"Well, I reckon no one follerred us here; not them five galoots we took ther wagon from, anyhow, fur they was about scared out of their boots."

Then he whistled a little more, and another laugh from all hands was the result.

Jack ran back to the cave and arranged the bell and rope to his satisfaction.

This was quite an idea the villains had put into practice, for it saved them the trouble of keeping a man on guard at the narrow entrance to their retreat.

The men began overhauling the contents of the wagon.

The blankets and things that would come in handy for them were carried into the cave, the Chinaman helping.

Then they tackled the box, which was about the size of an ordinary tea chest.

They slid it out on a couple of skids, and after half an hour managed to get it into the cave.

"There!" exclaimed Whistling Jerry, for he had worked as hard as any of the rest. "I'd like ter see ther galoots as will come an' take that away from us. We'll lay ~~low~~ with it fur a while, an' then we'll take a little at a time away an' change it inter cash."

Then he whistled and the usual laugh was the result.

He was just thinking of turning in for the night when the cook came to him and said:

"Me likee havee wagee, cappee."

"Oh, I furgot about that, High Low. I'll fix yer right up."

Then he counted out a hundred dollars and handed it to the Chinaman.

"Yer month ain't up yet," he remarked. "But I reckon I'll pay yer now, ter keep yer in a good humor."

"Slankee, cappee."

Jerry then started to whistle, and High Low fairly roared with laughter.

"You're broke in all right, you heathen. I see that. You know that when I whistle them what I'm talkin' ter has got ter laugh."

"High Low knowee," was the reply.

Half an hour later the cave was in a deep silence, save the snoring of the men, for all hands had turned in, relying on the bell to arouse them if anything went wrong.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWO CHINAMEN TAKE A SWIM IN THE RIVER.

Young Wild West was one of the first to rise in the morning.

He stood on the bank of the river, looking at the sun, which was just showing above the blue-gray line of the prairie in the distance, when Jasper Lake came down to him.

"Do yer really think yer kin git ther box of gold back, Young Wild West?" the miner asked.

"I feel pretty certain that we can," was our hero's reply. "All we will have to do is to find where the villains took it. It won't be so hard to get it away from them then."

"But there's nine of 'em, as I said last night, yer know."

"That won't make any difference. There are eight of us, not counting the girls, and the two Chinamen. I guess we can take care of any nine outlaws that ever lived."

"But there's only one rifle between ther five of us."

"That's all right. We have got extra rifles and shooters with us. We always take along enough, so if we should happen to lose the ones we are carrying. I have been caught by redskins more than once, and when I got away from them I had to go without my weapons. We'll fix you up with a shooter apiece, so don't let that worry you. We've got plenty of ammunition, too."

"Thank yer. I'll guarantee that we'll fight, if we've got anything ter fight with. We was took completely by surprise when them galoots rode up. We all thought they was cowboys, an' never dreamed that they was after ther box of gold. It's too bad, but if I kin git that gold back, an' git it home, I'll give ten thousand dollars."

"Well, you won't have to pay a cent, as far as we are concerned. The excitement we will have getting it for you will pay us. We don't go around the country doing favors for those we meet and expect pay for it. I am pretty well fixed just now, in the way of wealth, and so are my partners." While they stood there talking who should appear just below them on the bank but Arietta.

She had her rifle in her hand and was looking at something down the stream.

"What is it, Et?" Wild asked, walking toward her.

"A flock of ducks, Wild," was the reply. "Thought some of them might go good for dinner."

"That's right. I see them now. Jove! there's a hundred of them, I guess. Don't fire till I get my rifle. We ought to kill enough of them to make a duck apiece for

dinner. I'll fetch Charlie and Jim, and we'll all fire at once."

He was not long in getting his rifle and telling Charlie and Jim about it.

Anna and Eloise were just coming out of the tent, but the other of the miners and the two Celestials were still sound asleep.

Arietta led the way along the bank, dodging behind the willows that lined it just below the cottonwood grove, and Lake followed on behind to witness the shooting.

The flock of ducks was close to the shore on that side, and a slight bend in the river gave them a good chance to see them.

They were about two hundred yards off, but our friends thought they could do better by getting a little nearer.

In a flock like that they each ought to kill two or three with one bullet.

When they were at the right spot Wild gave the word and all four fired so close together that the reports of their rifles almost blended into one.

Of course the ducks that had not been hit arose, and several of them flew to the right on the same side of the river our friends were on.

Then it was that Young Wild West gave a display of his fancy shooting with a rifle.

He fired three times in quick succession and three of the ducks dropped toward the earth.

Charlie fired twice and got one, but Arietta was content with what she had done at the first shot, for she was positive that she had killed three.

"That beats anything I ever seen in ther line of duck shootin'," exclaimed Lake, his jaw dropping in amazement. "I reckon you folks don't need shotguns ter shoot small game."

"No," replied Wild. "Why should we? We are practicing all kinds of difficult shots almost every day. There is nothing like practice, you know."

"That's so, but I don't think I could hit a duck on ther fly with a rifle, if I was ter practice ten years at it."

"Oh, yes, you could. You can hit a target, can't you?"

"Sometimes I kin, an' sometimes I can't. I'm more likely ter miss than I am ter hit it."

"Now that we've got ther ducks down, ther thing is ter git 'em," observed Cheyenne Charlie, as he looked at the fallen ducks, some of which were floating as much as thirty feet from the bank.

"We'll let Hop and Wing get the ducks out of the water," answered our hero. "Mr. Lake, you run and call them. Tell them that they need not have on any more clothes than is absolutely necessary, as they may have to take a swim."

"All right," answered the miner, and then he smiled as he ran to the camp.

In a few minutes he came back, followed by the two Chinamen, who were both wondering what was wanted of them, for they had not understood Lake very well.

Wild and his two partners had fished all they could of

the slain ducks from the water, but the biggest part of them were there yet.

They had shot eleven of them, as near as they could judge, and six of them were drifting along with the sluggish current.

"Whattee wantee, Misler Wild?" Hop asked, rubbing his eyes to get himself thoroughly awake.

"Go and get those ducks before they get out in the middle of the river," was the reply.

"How we go?"

"Any way at all. Can't you swim?"

"Me no likee swim, Misler Wild."

"Me gittee!" exclaimed Wing, suddenly.

He had seen a log lying on the bank, ready to topple in the water almost.

He pushed it gently in the water and then kicked off his footgear.

"Me no 'fraid to gittee lille wet," he observed, and then he dropped down and got astraddle of the log.

The water was only a little over two feet deep right close to the bank, so Wing started to walk offshore, relying upon the log to hold him up when it got too deep for him to wade.

Hop's face soon took on a broad grin.

He thought he saw fun ahead.

Wing got the log out about ten feet and then he found that he could no longer touch bottom.

Hop was looking very expectant and so were the rest.

Meanwhile the ducks were drifting further down the stream.

But the current was turning them shoreward, so Charlie cut a pole.

"I reckon Wing won't never git 'em," he said; "so I'll try an' fish 'em in."

Just then Wing got out a little too far and over went the log, turning him upside down as quick as a flash.

There was a muffled shriek and then the Chinaman disappeared from view.

"Hip hi!" yelled Hop; "my blother allee samee velly goodee diver! Me velly ploud of my blother."

Wing came up sputtering at a fearful rate.

He saw all hands laughing at him, so instead of coming for the bank he struck out swimming to get the ducks.

"That's what yer oughter done in ther first place," the scout called out.

"Hip hi!" again yelled Hop, and then he proceeded to do a dance on the edge of the bank.

The temptation was too great for Charlie, and with a quick movement he sent Hop headfirst into the river.

Splash!

The Celestial's mirth was turned to fright in a twinkling, and it is safe to say that he swallowed at least a pint of water before he knew what he was doing.

"Help ther other heathen git them ducks, you simple galoot!" yelled the scout, as Hop came to the surface. "You kin swim, an' I know it! If yer start ter come

ashore without them birds I'll make a ring around yer in ther water with bullets!"

Hop heard.

He thought the scout surely would let him hear the sound of whistling hot lead, and he decided that it was best to join Wing in gathering in the slain birds.

They succeeded in getting them in a few minutes, and when they crawled out on the bank they presented a comical appearance, with the water dripping from them and their woe-begone looks.

It was the first time Jasper Lake had indulged in anything like a laugh since he lost the box of gold, and it must have done him a lot of good.

"They are as funny a pair as I ever seen," he said. "I reckon yer must take 'em around ther country with yer more fur ther fun yer kin git out of 'em than ther work they do."

"You haven't seen much of them yet," answered Wild. "Hop is not only a very funny heathen, but he is about as smart as they make them. He can do things that would surprise you."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I'll get him to show you something while Wing is getting the fire started."

"Good!"

It did not take the two Celestials long to change their garments.

Then Wing set about kindling a fire to cook their breakfast.

The rest of the inmates of the camp were up by this time, and they laughed heartily when they heard how Hop and Wing went into the river after the ducks.

They had seen them before they came out, but had not been close enough to witness how they went in.

Hop tried to make it appear that his brother made the most ridiculous figure in the water, and when Jim Dart finally agreed with him he got into a very good humor.

"Hop," said Wild, "I was telling Mr. Lake that you were a sleight-of-hand performer. Just show him one of your tricks, will you? Do a simple one that won't take you long."

"Allee light," answered the Celestial, grinning.

He now had his regular every-day gown on, and the many pockets in that garment contained various bits of things that could work wonders.

The Chinaman was really a sort of chemist, as well as a sleight-of-hand performer.

He could do things that were startling, as well as humorous.

Hop pulled out the yellow silk handkerchief he always carried and flaunted it in the air, while the miners looked on, wondering what he was up to.

The handkerchief was a big one, being about a yard square, so it could cover a whole lot, if it were necessary.

"Me havee um uncle in China, and he velly smartee man," the Chinaman began, smiling blandly at his audi-

ence; "me allee samee likee my uncle; me velly smartee, so be."

"Self-praise is a poor recommendation, I've heard say," remarked Hooley, grinning at his companions.

"Me showee nicee lillee tick," went on Hop, fixing his eyes on Lake, for it was he that he intended to make a sort of victim of, since he had not liked the way the man laughed at him when he was thrown in the river by the scout.

"What are yer goin' ter show?" asked the miner.

"You gottee some tobackee?"

"Yes, I reckon I've got plenty," was the reply.

"You lettee me havee your tobackee and me makee allee samee goodee cigar."

"I ain't got no tobacker in ther leaf, Hop."

"Lat allee light; me makee um nicee cigar."

Lake handed over a pouch containing some tobacco such as is used in pipes by smokers.

Hop smelled of it and nodded with satisfaction.

"Lat velly goodee tobackee; me makee um cigar allee light," he declared.

The five miners crowded around him to see what he was going to do.

Wild and his two partners looked on, too, but the girls, who were used to seeing the tricks the Chinaman performed, busied themselves in helping Wing get the breakfast ready.

Hop took about two ordinary pipefuls of tobacco from the pouch and carefully wrapped it in a big leaf he plucked from a plant near at hand.

This he placed on a flat stone right before his audience.

Then he shook the big handkerchief to show them there was nothing in it, and carefully covered the leaf that contained the tobacco.

"Now you watchee," he said, nodding at the miners, particularly to Lake.

They did watch with all the eyes they had.

Hop muttered a string in Chinese, sang a sort of a dirge and then got up and walked around the handkerchief three or four times.

"Now me showee how um leaf and tobackee havee makee nicee cigar," he observed, stooping to pick up the handkerchief.

CHAPTER V.

THE SEARCH FOR THE PRAIRIE PIRATES BEGINS.

Not one of the five miners expected to see anything else than the Chinaman had placed on the rock under the handkerchief.

What was their surprise, then, when they saw a cigar that was as well made as any they were in the habit of seeing lying on the stone.

The leaf that the tobacco had been wrapped in was gone, and there were no traces of it to be seen anywhere.

Young Wild West smiled at the exclamations of astonishment that went up from the miners.

"That's mighty funny," said one.

"It beats all!" another declared, shaking his head and looking at the smiling Celestial in an awesome way.

"It might be a trick in magic, but that cigar looks ter be all right," Lake ventured, after a pause.

"Cigar allee samee velly finee," Hop hastened to assure him. "You smokee after you eatee um bleakfast."

"All right, I will," was the quick reply, and then Lake picked up the cigar and placed it in his pocket.

"I reckon that's about all now," remarked Cheyenne Charlie. "That cookin' grub sends out a smell that makes me hungry. How about it, Wing? Is ther breakfast putty near ready?"

"Allee samee putty soonee, Misler Charlie," was the reply.

As Hop put his big yellow silk handkerchief in his pocket and looked dreamily at the sky above the miners made up their minds that he was something above the ordinary run of Chinamen.

He had their respect from that moment, for, though they knew it was but a clever trick that he had shown them, they had been unable to see anything about it that would indicate that it was a trick.

But a magician's hands are quicker than the eyes of ordinary people, and that accounted for it.

But they had not believed that he was really a sleight-of-hand performer until he did the trick.

Breakfast was ready a few minutes later and all hands sat down and ate heartily.

After the meal was over Jasper Lake took out the cigar Hop had made from the loose tobacco and leaf of the plant.

He had appeared to make it, for no one could prove that he did not, so it was all the same.

Wild saw Hop smile softly and turn away when the miner started to light the cigar.

He knew then that something was wrong about it.

But whatever it was, it would not injure him, for Hop knew better than to go far with his fun.

Lake picked a burning brand from the fire and applied it to the end of the cigar.

He puffed vigorously, and then he gave a nod of deep satisfaction.

"That's a mighty fine cigar yer made, Hop," he said. "I don't know how in thunder yer made it, but it's a good one."

His four friends looked at him rather enviously as he puffed away.

Suddenly there was a hissing noise and then out of the end of the cigar there came a squirming snake.

Lake heard the hissing sound and his eyes were turned to the lighted end, for there is where it came from.

As he saw the squirming little snake he uttered a yell and dropped the cigar.

"Whattee mattee?" asked Hop, in his most innocent way.

"Jerusalem!" gasped the man called Hooley. "Did yer ever see anything like that? Why, a snake about six inches long came out of ther end of that cigar!"

Young Wild West and his friends laughed heartily, and, noticing this, the alarmed looks left the faces of all but the victim of the joke.

"There's ther snake!" cried Lake, excitedly, as he pointed to the ground.

It was there, sure enough, but it was broken to pieces.

It was simply a Pharaoh's serpent egg that Hop had put in the cigar, and, though it is easily explained, Lake could not understand it, at all.

He had no other idea than that the cigar was bewitched.

"I ought ter have known better than ter smoke ther blamed cigar, anyhow," he said to Wild. "A cigar what comes inter existence ther way that one did ain't likely ter be right, anyhow. Gee, but I'm all flustered, blamed if I ain't."

Hooley and the rest were laughing heartily now, while Hop was the picture of innocent amazement.

"That's one on you, Lake," said one of his friends. "Ther Chinaman has had some fun with yer. Ther next time you'll be a little more careful how yer take a cigar when it's offered ter yer. I'm mighty glad I didn't git one like it, fur I ain't no friend ter snakes, nor I never was."

Gradually it dawned upon the miner that he was the victim of a joke.

"What was it, anyhow?" he asked, trying to smile, and then he stooped and looked at the fragments of the snake.

"That was the rest of the magic trick Hop was showing you," answered Wild. "He gave you the first part before breakfast and the last part just now. Pretty good trick, wasn't it?"

"Well, I should say it was! It is one on me, boys! I give a man credit for catching me like that, no matter if he is a Chinee. I'll bet there ain't many fellows like him of any nation."

"Me havee uncle in China whattee velly smart," spoke up Hop, with a smile that was child-like and bland; "me velly muchee likee um uncle."

"I'd like ter meet that galoot of an uncle of yours once," remarked Cheyenne Charlie. "I've heard so much about him that I kin imagine jest what kind of a lookin' galoot he is."

"You say one timee you no believee me have uncle, Misler Charlie," said Hop, looking at him and grinning in childish fashion.

"I reckon I'll ask that galoot of a brother of yours about it. Wing, come here!"

"Allee light; me comee light away, Misler Charlie," answered the cook, and then he came over, a wet towel in his hands and a look of expectancy on his face.

"Wing, are yer sure you're a brother to Hop?" the scout queried.

"Me velly sure, Misler Charlie," was the reply. "Me

havee samee mother as Hop, and Hop havee samee father as me havee; we allee samee blotherers."

"Well, have you got an uncle in China?"

"Um uncles allee dead; um last uncle havee head cuttee off. He lun likee 'pless slain in um war, and um empelor makee havee head cuttee off."

"An' he was the last uncle you had alive, then?"

Wing nodded in the affirmative.

Hop cast a withering glance at him.

"My blother no know muchee," he explained; "he comee to Melica two, three months before me comee; my unclee so smartee mandarin lat he comee back to um life after my blother comee 'way. My uncle livee in China now; he gottee big tea garden, and he velly muchee friend to um empelor."

Wing then acted as though he might be mistaken, and he hastened to say that maybe his brother was right.

But no one cared, anyhow. Hop was such an awful liar that it was amusing to listen to him.

Charlie then wanted to bet them both that they could not prove that they had ever been born at all, and they would not accept.

"Me bettee you lat me alive, allee samee Melican man," Hop answered, after he had thought a minute. "If me alive, allee samee Melican man, me must be bornee allee samee Melican man. Misler Charlie, he gittee veily smartee, allee samee my uncle in China."

The miners were very much tickled over the Chinaman's funny ways, and they all declared that they wanted to see more of his clever work in sleight-of-hand.

"He'll show you something more in that line when we go into camp again," said Young Wild West. "But just now we've got something on hand. We are going to try and get the box of gold for you. There may be a stiff fight on hand, so we might as well prepare for it. Jim, just see to it that each of the men here has a revolver and some cartridges. We have three or four rifles, too, and they may as well take them until this business is done with."

"All right," answered Jim, and he soon supplied the miners with the weapons.

Then the Chinamen were ordered to load the pack-horses and get ready to take the trail of the Prairie Pirates.

Jasper Lake and his friends were in high glee now.

They were eager to get at the villains, for they felt that they had been madly treated indeed by them.

They not only wanted to recover the gold, but they desired revenge upon the Prairie Pirates as well.

In less than half an hour all hands were heading in the direction the villains had last been seen going by the miners.

Lake was content to ride one of the mules, though Wild told him he could have the horse Wing was riding, if he desired.

"Never mind," was the reply. "This mule seems to be about as fast as the average of his kind, and I can keep

up with the pack-horses. I hope we don't have to do any fighting in the saddle, for if we do a mule is a hard thing to manage. I will make out all right, so long as that don't happen."

They pushed along the regular cattle trail, keeping a watch for some spot where the villains might have turned off.

In a couple of hours, they were very close to the ridge, and then it was not long before they reached the spot where the Prairie Pirates had entered the gulch.

"It seems to me that the scoundrels have not tried to cover their trail much," remarked our hero, whose sharp eyes easily detected the tracks of the horses. "It must be that they waited until they got to a good place to hide the trail. Well, I guess we will find it, if anyone can. We are used to this sort of work."

Lake nodded.

"I kin tell that easy enough, Young Wild West," he answered. "You know your business, an' so does your pards. Anyone what kin shoot three ducks on ther wing with a rifle without missin' knows his business, I reckon."

"Oh, that wasn't such wonderful shooting," Wild answered, smiling at the man. "I have made better shots with a revolver. I have trimmed the mustaches of rascals and cut their hair for them with bullets."

"Is that so? I wouldn't want yer ter try it on me."

"Well, you don't happen to be a rascal, so I won't try it on you."

"I hope yer git ther chance ter try it on Whistling Jerry, the leader of the Prairie Pirates. I would like to see him get good and scared."

"Well, maybe I will get the chance. If I do I will show you some of my fancy shooting."

They pushed on after entering the gulch and followed the stream, the same as the villains had done the night before.

As has been stated, the ground was hard and stony there, so they could no longer see the hoof-prints or tracks of the wagon.

Right near the point where the gulch narrowed into the passage that led to the headquarters of the gang they saw a slope to the right that led to the top of the ridge.

Wild called a halt here.

It seemed as though the Prairie Pirates had crossed the brook and rode up the slope, for the wagon could have been pulled up it quite easily by the four mules.

Wild crossed the brook, after dismounting, followed by the scout.

The slope was of rock, so there was no chance to pick out the tracks of the wagon.

Where it had entered the stream they could not tell, either, for the hardness of the ground and the strata of rock gave no chance for any marks to be made.

Wild looked into the narrow gut and saw a dead tree lying across the opening at the other end of it.

It was nothing strange to see the dead tree there, for such sights were common.

Trees fall very often across streams and gullies, and they usually lie there until they rot away.

This one looked as though it had been there a long time.

Certainly there was nothing about the narrow place that would indicate that a mule team had driven through it but a few hours before.

Our friends were completely deceived.

None of them had the least idea that the Prairie Pirates had gone that way.

"They've come through ther gulch an' went up there somewhere," said Charlie. "That's ther first place I've seen where they would git out of here with ther wagon."

"It looks that way, Charlie," retorted Wild. "Well, we'll soon find out if they went that way or not. There must be some soft ground up there."

He ascended the slope, followed by the scout, the rest remaining on the other side of the brook with the horses.

When they had got to the top of the slant they found ground that was soft, as Wild expected.

But there were no tracks there.

CHAPTER VI.

HOP WAH GOES ON A MISSION.

Wild and Charlie searched about for fully ten minutes, but not the least sign of a wagon track or a hoof-print could they see.

"This are what I call mighty funny, Wild," remarked the scout. "There's one thing sartin, that gang come in ther gulch with that wagon."

"Yes, that is a sure thing," replied our hero.

"Well, where did they go, then?"

"That is what we have got to find out. One thing certain is that they didn't fly away, and that being the case, they must be around somewhere."

"Well, it's a puzzle ter me, an' no mistake."

"It may be that the villains drove into the gulch and then went out again, just to fool anyone who might follow them."

"That's so."

"But that couldn't be, either," and the young deadshot shook his head. "They could not turn that wagon anywhere in the gulch without leaving marks."

"They might have covered their marks, Wild."

"Well, I guess we had better leave the rest here, and the two of us will go back on foot and try and find out just what they did do."

"That's ther idea."

They came down the hill and waded across the little brook.

"How about it, Wild?" asked Jim.

"It is a puzzle," was the reply. "They certainly did not go up the hill."

Jim had been looking pretty closely at the narrow gut through which the shallow stream flowed.

"I have come to the conclusion that the wagon could have been driven through there if that dead tree was not in the way," he remarked, jerking his thumb toward the spot.

"Jove! You're right on that, Jim. But that dead tree looks as though it has been there ever since it fell."

"But it would have been quite easy for half a dozen men to put it there, Wild," spoke up Arietta.

"Yes, that is true enough."

But Wild did not see fit to investigate the narrow opening between the rocks just then.

He proceeded to carry out the suggestion he had made to Charlie.

"Jim, you and the rest stay right here," he said, as he started off on foot with the scout. "If we don't find that the villains turned and went out of the gulch by the same way they came in we will stop here for a while."

The two were not long in walking the whole distance to the mouth of the gulch.

They made a careful search and came to the conclusion that the Prairie Pirates had not left the gulch after entering it.

That meant that they were in it somewhere yet.

And there was only one place to look for them now, and that was through the narrow gut.

When they got back they found their companions seated on the ground beneath the shade of a tree.

It was near noon, and they were all beginning to grow hungry.

"What luck, boys?" Dart asked.

"They never left the gulch," was our hero's reply.

"Then I guess we had better move that dead tree and go on through the gulch."

"Yes, but we'll have dinner first. This is a fine place to camp, I think. Get the pack-horses unloaded, you Chinamen. Then strike in and get those ducks broiled."

Hop and Wing flew to obey.

They were anxious to get something to eat themselves, so they worked pretty fast.

It was not long before a fire was started, and as the ducks they had shot that morning had been plucked on the way, they were soon ready for broiling.

In an hour from the time Wild had declared that they would camp there the noonday meal was ready.

That they all ate with a relish goes without saying.

Wing, with the assistance of Anna and the girls, could get up as fine a meal as was ever eaten in a camp.

Up to this time Jasper Lake had said little about the box of gold.

He now showed considerable anxiety, for he thought Young Wild West was at his wit's ends.

"What do yer think about it, Mr. West?" he asked, as he lighted his pipe and walked over to where the young deadshot was standing near the brook.

"Well, I guess we'll find them all right," was the reply. "I am going to make a try pretty soon."

"You are goin' ter wade through there, then?" and the miner pointed at the narrow place.

"Yes, that is what I am going to do; or it may be that I will send someone. I am thinking of sending Hop."

"Ther Chinee galoot what played ther joke on me with ther cigar, eh?"

"Yes, I will let him prepare himself, and in case he comes in contact with the Prairie Pirates he will fool them and get away, I think. He is smart enough to do that. He has some giant crackers with him, and they are made in such a way that they make a dense smoke when they explode. Hop has used them on two or three different occasions with great effect. I'll speak to him about it now."

Hop was called over, and when Wild told him what was wanted of him he declared that he was willing to go.

"Well, then, just get ready," said Wild.

"Me allee samee ready now," was the quick retort.

"Have you got your crackers ready, so you kin let one off at an instant's notice?"

"Yes; me lightee um cigar, and len me be ready to makee um fireclacker go bang!"

He calmly pulled a big black-looking cigar from his pocket and lighted it.

Then he showed a cracker that looked big enough to blow a man's head off.

This he calmly shoved up his right sleeve, keeping the fuse in his hand.

"Now whattee wantee poor Chinee do, Misler Wild?" he asked.

"I want you to wade through there and get to the other side of that dead tree if you can," was the reply. "Don't climb over the tree, for if you do you might be seen right away. I don't want anyone to see you, for if they happen to they might shoot at you before you know it. If you get the other side of the fallen tree, and into the bushes, you will know what to do. I want to find out if the men who stole the box of gold are in there. It may be that they went on up the gulch, and if they did you can find the wagon tracks, most likely. You go on through, and after you have been there five minutes I'll follow you. Leave a trail through the bushes, so it will be easy for me to come right on. Now I guess you understand all about it."

"Me undelstand velly well," answered Hop, and then he looked at the miners and smiled in his innocent way.

"You hear me shootee allee samee putty quickee, you comee allee samee putty quickee, Misler Wild," he added, throwing an anxious glance at Wild.

"You bet I will, Hop!" was the answer. "I am going to depend on you to fool the rascally galoots with your funny business and magic, in case they are close by."

"Allee light."

The Celestial at once started off.

Wild was not afraid that he would get hurt, for Hop

had a way of taking care of himself, though he could not fight enough to keep himself warm.

He was such an innocent-looking Chinaman that anyone would have picked him up for a fool.

Hop waded through the shallow brook rather gingerly.

It seemed that he did not much like the idea of wetting his feet.

But he kept right on, and when he came to the fallen tree he crouched and turned to the right.

Then he got out upon the bank and crawled under it.

Just what he was going to do next he did not know, but he puffed away at his cigar, so it would be ready to light the cracker he had concealed in his sleeve.

The bushes and rocks were plentiful the other side of the narrow gut, and when Hop crept behind a clump of bushes he paused and looked around.

Then he saw where the wagon had emerged from the brook.

The marks were very plain, and there was no mistaking them.

"Me velly smartee, allee samee," he muttered; "me findee outee where um Plailie Pilates go."

Hop moved cautiously around the rocks and soon reached the plain trail made by the wagon and horses.

He found there was a regular bridle path there.

"Me allee light," he thought; "Young Wild West pickee out me 'causee he knowee me allee light. Misler Charlie or Misler Jim no findee tlaile likee me."

Then he started to follow the trail, keeping close to the bushes and the rocks.

He had not gone more than a hundred feet when he pricked up his ears and looked interested.

Some strange sounds came faintly to his ears—or rather they were strange if anyone but a Chinaman had heard them.

The fact was that a Chinaman was singing in his own language.

Hop looked puzzled for the space of a minute and then he grinned.

The fact that he was so near one of his own countrymen made him feel more at home.

Hop made up his mind to have a look at the fellow as soon as possible, so he started in the direction the singing came from.

He did not forget to use caution, for he had been in so many tight places that it came as a sort of second nature to him.

Gradually the sounds became plainer, and when two or three minutes had passed he was so near the spot it came from that he could understand the words of the Celestial song.

But he kept right on, and the next minute he came in sight of a scene that caused him to grin more than ever.

A Chinaman was busy hanging up some clothes on a line near the brook at a distance of probably a hundred yards.

Hop looked in silence for the full space of a minute,

and then he turned his gaze in various directions, looking for a chance to get to where the Chinaman was without being observed by him or anyone else who might be looking.

There was a good chance, for the shrubbery was thicker there than at the entrance to that part of the gulch, which, by the way, was really a minature valley.

Hop was now pretty close to the cave occupied by the Prairie Pirates, though he could not see it.

The Chinaman he saw was the cook for the villains, as the reader no doubt supposed.

High Low, as he was called, had come down to the brook to do the washing for the men, and since he had been paid his month's salary the night before, he was in a rather pleasant frame of mind.

That was why he was singing.

The members of the band were nearly all asleep yet, for they had been tired when they came back to the gulch, and it was rather late when they turned in.

With the alarm rigged, they felt that they were safe from being disturbed.

They had not counted on anyone entering the valley by crawling under the dead tree, instead of climbing over it and putting a weight upon it.

Hop could not resist the temptation to make his presence known to his countryman, so, after thinking it over for a minute or two, he arose and walked boldly toward him.

He was within twenty feet of him when High Low saw him.

The rascally Chinaman was astonished.

"Where did you come from?" he asked, speaking in the language of his race.

"Me dlop down flom um sky," answered Hop, sticking to his pigeon-English. "Me allee samee gleat mandarin."

High Low looked surprised.

As far as appearances went, Hop was just about the same sort of an individual he was, and the answer made him somewhat puzzled.

He was pretty sure that the visitor to the little valley could not have got there by the regular way, and that made it look as though he might have dropped from the sky, or got there in some other mysterious way.

"You dlop from um sky?" he asked, slowly.

For an answer Hop looked up at the clouds and made some peculiar motions which High Low seemed to understand.

He dropped the flannel shirt he had been in the act of hanging on the lariat he had put up for a clothesline and looked at his countryman in an awesome way.

"You shooee me," he said.

"Allee light!" And then Hop pulled out his big yellow handkerchief.

Hop meant to show him all right, and he was going to make him understand that he really was a great mandarin, at that.

CHAPTER VII.

WILD HOT AFTER THE BOX OF GOLD.

Young Wild West did not wait five minutes before he started to follow Hop Wah.

It occurred to him that the Chinaman might run into serious trouble before he got far, so he thought it best to follow right behind him.

Wild waded through the brook and crept under the fallen tree the same as Hop had done.

But he was more of an observer than was Hop, and he noticed that there was a rope tied about the upper part of the dead tree.

There was something surprising about this, so he quickly allowed his gaze to follow the rope, and when he saw that it went into a block that was hitched to a projecting rock overhead he gave a nod of the deepest satisfaction.

The rope then ran through the thick foliage of a tree and was lost to view.

"Whew!" exclaimed the daring young deadshot, under his breath; "I guess I have found out something by coming through the gut. The Prairie Pirates came through here as sure as I am alive!"

But Wild did not mean to investigate where the rope went just then.

He wanted to keep in sight of Hop, so he looked around and caught a glimpse of the Celestial as he was crawling through the bushes about a hundred feet away.

He promptly started after him.

It was easier for Wild to make his way along and keep himself hidden from view than it was for Hop to do it.

So he had no difficulty in keeping close to him.

He could not help admire the tact and skill in woodcraft the Chinaman was showing, however.

Right behind the Celestial, and within a few yards of him, our hero went along.

Through the bushes and around the rocks he went, right on the trail of Hop.

Wild heard the singing of the cook for the Prairie Pirates about the same time Hop did.

At first he thought it must be Hop, suddenly gone crazy, since he could not tell exactly where he was at that moment.

But there is a difference in the voices of Chinamen, as well as other people, and he knew Hop's voice so well that he quickly dropped that idea.

"It is a heathen, all right," the boy muttered. "I wonder what I am running up against, anyhow?"

He soon found out.

Young Wild West could not suppress a broad grin when he saw the Chinaman hanging up the clothes on the rope line and singing away for all he was worth.

But when he saw Hop rise from the bushes and approach the Celestial he felt like calling him back.

It was not a wise move, or, at least, it did not seem to be.

Wild hurried along and got up close to them.

He heard everything that was said, and then he came to the conclusion that it was not such a very bad move, after all.

"I guess I'll be a spectator to this," he thought, as he got into a good position. "That Chinaman evidently is in the employ of the Prairie Pirates. But where can the scoundrels be? There does not appear to be any way to get out of here other than the narrow gut. I'll just wait a few minutes before I investigate any further. This is going to be something good, for Hop has that fellow pretty well worked up. I actually believe the heathen really thinks his unexpected visitor dropped from the clouds."

Meanwhile Hop was getting ready to do something that would mystify High Low, and by the way he smiled it was pretty certain that he was not going to do the trick by halves.

"You gottee um dollee bill?" he asked High Low.

"Yes, me gottee allee samee plenty dollee bill," was the reply.

Hop nodded as the Chinaman pulled a roll from his pocket and held it up.

Then he pulled a silver dollar of his own from his pocket and showed it.

Looking around, he found a smooth, bare spot on the ground, and then he beckoned High Low to come up close and watch him.

"You watchee and me showee nicee lillee tick," he said; "me do likee lis for um empelor once, and len he say me velly muchee mandarin."

High Low nodded.

Hop placed the silver dollar on the ground and then carefully covered it with his handkerchief.

"Now me takee you dollee bill," he said, blandly, and High Low promptly handed him one of the ones he had.

Hop laid this on top the handkerchief. and, pointing to it, said:

"Now watchee."

The other Chinaman was watching all right.

He had no idea what was going to happen, but he did know that it was his dollar that was lying on the handkerchief, and he did not want to lose it.

Hop carefully gathered up the corners of the handkerchief and the dollar bill was soon lost to view in the handkerchief, or somewhere else.

Suddenly he lifted up the handkerchief and then High Low gave a gasp of amazement.

The silver dollar was not on the ground, but in its stead was the paper dollar.

"Lat your dollee?" Hop asked.

High Low hastened to assure him that it was.

But it was not, of course.

It was one that Hop had put there, making out that he left the silver coin there when he covered the handkerchief over that particular spot.

"Lat funny!" exclaimed High Low

"Velly funny," Hop admitted.

"Where um other dollee?"

"Me lookee for um other dollee."

Then Hop picked up the bill and crumpled it in his hand.

This done, he took a match from his pocket and struck it.

He calmly applied the flame to the bill and placed it on the ground.

It was not the bill, of course, but simply a piece of green paper that looked like one.

High Low acted as though he was going to grab for it, but Hop motioned for him to stand back.

The paper soon burned up and then Hop flaunted the handkerchief and blew aside the ashes.

Much to the astonishment of High Low, there lay the silver dollar on the ground where the paper had burned.

The cook for the Prairie Pirates let his jaw drop.

He could not account for such work as that.

"Me burnee you dollee; you takee lis one," said Hop, picking up the silver coin.

High Low put out his hand to receive it.

Hop slapped the coin against the open palm quickly and then drew back his hand.

High Low shut his fingers to in order to hold the coin, and then he opened his hand and uttered a cry that was half fear, half astonishment.

There was the identical paper dollar he had allowed Hop to take from him right in his hand.

Hop was holding out both his hands and they were empty.

The surprised Celestial rubbed his eyes and then took a good look at the dollar.

There was no mistaking it, so he slowly put it in his pocket with the rest of his money.

"You likee me?" asked Hop, smiling at him.

"Yes, me likee. You velly muchee smartee; you dlop um sky allee light!"

"Whattee you namee?"

"Melican mans callee allee samee High Low."

"Me namee Hop Wah."

High Low nodded, evidently not knowing just what else to do.

"You likee thlow dicee?" Hop asked, unable to withstand the temptation to win some of the money the fellow had shown him.

The Chinaman hesitated.

"Me likee thlow dicee lillie bit," he answered.

"Allee light; me thlow um dicee for fivee dollee."

High Low reluctantly drew forth a five dollar bill.

It was plain that he feared Hop, and did not like to refuse.

They each put their money on the ground and Hop produced three dice.

He was just about to roll them out on the ground when there came an interruption.

Whistling Jerry, the leader of the Prairie Pirates, stepped from the bushes and confronted them.

Young Wild West, from his place of concealment, saw him before either of the Chinamen did.

Our hero was ready for him, and if he made a move to hurt Hop he would have interfered.

But Whistling Jerry made no such move.

There was an amused smile on his face as he stepped forward.

"Who is that heathen, High Low?" he asked. "I've been watchin' an' listenin' ter him fur ther last ten minutes. I heard yer talkin' here, an' I didn't know what ter make of it."

"He Hop Wah, velly muchee smartee mandarin," replied the cook. "He dlop flom um sky."

"Yes, I heard him say that. But that's nonsense. He's a very smart heathen, but he didn't drop from ther sky. I want ter know jest where yer did drop from."

The villain grasped Hop by the collar as he said this and looked at him sternly.

"Me gittee on um hill uppee lere, an' me fallee down in here," Hop answered, slightly alarmed at the sudden interruption, for he had forgotten what he had come there for.

"Ah! that sounds a bit more reasonable. But how in thunder did yer git up there?" and the leader of the gang of villains pointed to about the only visible spot where a man could roll down into the little valley and not break his neck.

"Me losee way last night; me go to sleepee and um mulee walkee way; me go lookee for um mule when me wakee up, and me gittee up lere and len fall down here. No hurtee much!" lied Hop, who could not be beaten at that sort of business.

Whistling Jerry began to whistle, and then High Low promptly burst into a laugh.

"You laugh, too, you heathen!" exclaimed the villain. "When I whistle everybody has to laugh."

"Allee light," answered Hop, and then, as the man started to whistle again, he laughed heartily.

"So yer lost yer mule, hey?" asked Whistling Jerry, as he ceased whistling. "I reckon yer have had a big time of it. But it's sorter strange how yer got up there, though. I didn't know a galoot could climb up from ther other side. I allowed that it was about all a mountain goat could do."

But he did not doubt what Hop had said.

Just then the man called Jack put in appearance.

He was closely followed by two more of the scoundrels.

Hop was perfectly at his ease, for he knew that as long as they did not make him a prisoner and tie his hands he would be all right.

"Plenty Melican mans," he ventured, smiling in his bland way.

"Yes, there's enough of us here, I reckon," answered Whistling Jerry. "Boys, what do yer think of this galoot, anyhow? He tumbled from ther top of ther cliff up there,

an' I found him bere doin' sleight-of-hand tricks fur High Low. He's ther smartest heathen I ever seen, he is!"

The followers of the man looked amazed.

Like Whistling Jerry, they had thought it impossible for anyone to get into the little valley save by the regular way.

"You're sure ther bell didn't ring, Cap?" asked one.

"Sartin of it," was the reply. "Oh, I'm satisfied that ther heathen got here ther way he said he did. But since he's got here, what's goin' ter become of him?"

"I reckon he won't make very good eatin', so there's no use in roastin' him," answered Jack, with a grin.

"Me no likee be loasted!" protested Hop; "me velly goodee Chinee."

"Well, there is one thing about it," said Whistling Jerry; "he's got ter stay here, now that he's here. I reckon he kin be of some help ter us; an' I'm sartin that he kin amuse us."

Wild was very much interested in all this talk.

He knew that Hop was perfectly safe, for the present, anyhow, so he decided to try and find out where the box of gold was.

He had heard the remark made about the bell not ringing, and it was natural that he should apply it to the rope he had seen.

He now began to move cautiously around in order to get to the place he had seen the men come from, for there was where they were camped, he thought.

With the utmost caution he worked his way along, and presently he came in sight of the cave.

The rest of the men were just coming out, and when they had disappeared in the bushes Young Wild West crawled softly to the cave.

He was doing a risky thing, but he was used to doing risky things, and, bent upon finding the box of gold, he reached the mouth of the cave.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHISTLING JERRY IS CAPTURED.

Wild crept right into the cave, for he was positive that all the men had left it.

"This is a pretty snug place," he muttered, as he got inside. "It looks as though they have come here to stay. Now for the box of gold."

He looked out of the cave, and was able to see the group of men gathered around the two Chinamen.

They could not have seen him if they had been looking that way, for he was in the shadows.

It did not take the boy long to find the box in a corner of the cave.

It was lying right in view, for the outlaws of course expected no one would interfere with it.

Wild knew the box the moment he saw it, for he had been given a good description of it by Jasper Lake.

He knew it would not be good policy for him to linger long, though he was not afraid to face the whole nine villains, if it came to the point.

But just now he thought it best to go back to his friends as soon as possible.

But before leaving the cave he took a quick look around.

When his eyes rested on a bell such as is used at country schoolhouses, he became interested.

It was tied so it hung almost in the center of the cave, and the thin rope attached to the handle led out and over the limbs of a nearby tree.

"So that is the bell that will give the alarm when anyone comes to the entrance of this little valley, is it?" he thought. "Well, I'll just fix it so it won't give any alarm before I leave here."

He got out of the cave in a hurry, and following the line of the rope through the shrubbery till he came to a good place, he drew his knife and cut it in two, keeping hold of both ends.

He tied one end to one limb, and the other to one that was close to it.

This would make it impossible for the rope attached to the fallen tree to ring the bell, no matter if the tree was carried away.

With a smile of satisfaction on his face, Wild started back to his friends.

He knew that Hop was safe for the present, and he wanted to get Charlie, Jim, and the rest into the valley, so they could begin the fight for the box of gold in earnest.

Wild had no difficulty in getting back to the narrow place the brook ran through.

He did not take the trouble to crawl under the dead tree, but leaped over it and waded through the brook to the place where his companions had camped.

They heard him coming, and when they saw the smile on his face they knew that his errand had been successful.

"How did you make out, Wild?" Arietta asked.

"Fine!" was the reply. "I found the box of gold!"

"What!" cried Lake, leaping a foot from the ground. "Do yer mean that, Young Wild West?"

"As sure as you live, I do," was the reply. "I left Hop amusing the nine outlaws. He is perfectly safe, and I haven't the least doubt but that he will get away from them without help. There is a Chinaman there, too, and he goes by the name of High Low."

Then he told them all he had seen and heard in as few words as possible.

Cheyenne Charlie grinned when he heard what Hop did to the other Chinaman.

"I reckon if ther galoot called Whistlin' Jerry hadn't come along jest as he did Hop would have got ther heathen's money away from him all right," he said.

"Well, you can't tell but that he might get some of the

men's before he quits them," observed Jim Dart. "His mania for gambling goes over everything else, it seems."

It was less than a quarter of a mile from where our friends were to the cave occupied by the Prairie Pirates.

While they could not hear the voices of men, unless they shouted, they easily heard a report like that of a small cannon about ten minutes after Wild came back.

They all knew what that meant.

Hop had shot off the giant cracker he had been holding in readiness.

"I guess he'll be coming now," said Wild. "I'll go to the fallen tree and wait for him."

Unslinging his rifle, for there was no telling but that he might have to use it, he hurried through the cut.

He was just in time to see Hop running like a deer in that direction.

There was no one after him, either, and Wild was glad to see that. It was more than likely that the Chinaman was going to succeed in making his escape.

He remained right there, crouching so he could not be seen, in case any of the villains did come.

On came Hop, dodging through the bushes, and leaping over the smaller rocks and boulders that he came to.

"I had no idea that the galoot could run so fast," our hero muttered, as he watched the flying Chinaman.

Just when Hop was within a hundred yards of the outlet to the valley a man came in view in hot pursuit of him.

It was Whistling Jerry.

There was no one else with him, and our hero could not help wondering why it was.

The leader of the Prairie Pirates had a rifle with him, and when he saw that the fleeing Chinaman was nearing the outlet he paused and raised it to his shoulder.

Crack!

The sharp report rang out, but Hop never stopped running.

Wild did not fire an answering shot, for he saw that the man was not going to try it again just then.

"Stop your runnin', you heathen!" yelled Jerry. "Yer can't git out of here that way. Yer may as well give in. I ain't goin' ter kill yer. I was only foolin'."

But Hop never turned his head.

He reached the fallen tree the next moment, and diving under it, went sprawling into the brook, causing a loud splashing noise which reached the ears of his pursuer.

Wild helped Hop to his feet.

"Get on through!" he exclaimed, in a low tone of voice. "I'll take care of him."

"Allee light, Misler Wild," panted the Celestial. "Me havee lun likee Sammee Hill!"

Wild paid no further attention to him, but waited for Whistling Jerry to come up.

Our hero had already made up his mind to take the man a prisoner.

By doing that they might be able to get possession of the box of gold without putting up a fight.

The leader of the villains did not stop till he got to the fallen tree.

"I reckon I'll jump right over," Wild heard him say. "Ther bell will ring, an' then ther boys will know enough ter come on. I told 'em I was goin' ter catch ther heathen alone, but since he's gone an' got out I'll want some help, I reckon. It won't do ter let sich a smart Chinaman as that go runnin' around ther country loose."

Placing both hands on the tree, Jerry vaulted over.

As he landed in the brook with a splash Wild raised up and caught him by the throat with his left hand, and placed his revolver against his face.

"Keep perfectly quiet, or you will die, Whistling Jerry!" he exclaimed. "You are my prisoner."

The villain was thunderstruck.

"Who might you be, young feller?" he asked, looking at our hero with distended eyes.

"I am Young Wild West," was the reply. "I don't suppose you ever heard of me, did you?"

"Thunder?"

"Never mind about any thunder just now; the day is too clear for any of that. Just march along with me like a little gentleman."

"You've got me foul, boy. I'll do jest as yer tell me ter," was the reply.

"Good! That shows how wise you are. If you had offered to fight I would have soon showed you what a fool you were. I am only a boy, but I am used to handling such galoots as you are."

Wild now took him by the shoulder and forced him to walk through to the camp at the other end of the narrow part of the gulch.

"Hooray!" cried Hop, for he, along with the rest, had heard Wild talking, and they knew he must have a prisoner.

"I reckon he's got ther galoot what was chasin' yer, Hop," said the scout.

"Hip hi! hooray!" again shouted the Chinaman.

"Stop that, Hop," commanded Wild. "There is no need of letting the rest of the gang hear you. I've got Mr. Whistling Jerry, and I am going to keep him till we get the box of gold!"

Lake fairly danced with joy!"

"It is the scoundrel, sure enough!" he cried. "Oh, ain't I glad! I'll git that box of gold home ter Omaha, after all!"

The leader of the Prairie Pirates scowled at the miner.

"I reckon you'll never see that box of gold agin', yer sneakin' coyote!" he answered, hotly. "That's where you'll never see it agin. Ther box is burned up, an' ther gold is divided between me an' my pards. Don't ever think you'll see it agin."

Wild knew this was a lie, of course, but he was not going to let the villain know he had been to the cave and seen the box.

Lake looked at him appealingly, but Wild cast a warning glance at him, and he remained silent.

"Just tie this fellow to a tree, boys," said the young deadshot to his partners. "We are going to keep him awhile. "Lake must have every ounce of that gold before Whistling Jerry leaves this spot."

There was a sardonic smile on the face of the villain as he was bound to a tree near by.

"Now, then, I guess you can put up the tents, Wing," our hero remarked. "We may have to stay here a day or two, and we may get away before night. We are going to stay till we accomplish our purpose, however."

Jim and Charlie helped Wing with the tents, and they were soon up.

Then the girls proceeded to make themselves at home. Hop had been busy getting on dry clothing, and when he appeared before them he had on a purple gown that was trimmed with gold lace.

How he managed to carry such costumes around without spoiling them was a sort of mystery, but as no one tried to solve it, nor bothered their heads about it, Hop did not have to explain.

Wild passed it around among all hands for them not to let on that he had been to the cave of the outlaws.

He thought he would make it as mystifying as he could to Whistling Jerry.

After a short consultation with his partners he decided to send Hop with a flag of truce and tell the Prairie Pirates that unless they brought the box of gold to the camp they would have to fight on their own grounds.

He walked over to the prisoner and said:

"Can you write?"

"I reckon I kin," was the reply.

"Well, unless you write a note to your men and tell them to deliver the box of gold here within three hours, you will have a short trial, and then be lynched! You will hang from the identical tree you are tied to! Do you understand?"

The face of the villain paled.

Wild spoke in such a way that it was bound to impress him.

"I'll write ther note," he said.

"I'll untie your right hand for you, so you can have a good show to write the note."

"All right."

Pencil and paper was brought to him, and when his right hand was free he scribbled off the following:

"Boys, it ain't no use. I'm as good as dead if Young Wild West don't git that box of gold here at ther entrance where ther dead tree is. Git that wagon loose from ther trees, an' then fetch it over. Ther sooner ther better, especially fur me."

Wild called Hop and told him what was required of him, and the Chinaman was ready to go on an errand again to the same place.

"I guess they won't hurt you," our hero said. "Just give them this note, and wait for an answer. "How was it that you had to run so hard before?"

"Whistling Jelly say he go killee me, so me shootee off um fire-clacker, and len me lun."

"Oh, that was it, eh? Well, you just tell Whistling Jerry's gang that he is a captive, and that he will be shot or hanged if the box of gold is not brought here inside of two hours. That is what is written in the note, but you can impress it on their minds that they will never see their leader alive again unless they send the box with the mules and wagon."

"Allee light; me undelstand."

CHAPTER IX.

THE GAME THAT WOULDN'T WORK.

Hop, attired in his gaudy gown, walked straight for the cave of the outlaws.

He only got half way when he was met by three of the men.

They looked surprised when they saw that he had changed his wearing apparel.

"It's ther Chinee galoot!" exclaimed one.

"That's sartin!" added a second.

"But how did he git that purple rig on?" queried the third.

"Me gittee allee wet, so me makee lillee changee," said Hop, smiling at them. "Me got plenty clothes in um camp."

"Where in thunder is your camp?" asked the man who had spoken first.

"Light outee lere," and the Chinaman pointed in the proper direction.

"Is there anyone camped there with yer?"

"Yes, Young Wild West allee samee, and plenty more men."

The three villains looked at each other uneasily.

"Boss send um lillee note to um Plailie Pilates," observed Hop, as he handed over the missive Whistling Jerry had written.

One of them could read, and with an air of bewilderment he read it.

"You undelstand putty well now, so be?" Hop asked. "Young Wild West gottee lope allee leady to hang um Whistling Jelly. No gittee um box of gold he gittee hung, allee samee horsee t'ief!"

"This are what I calls putty bad sorter work," declared the reader of the note. "Boys, what are we goin' ter do about it?"

"I reckon we'd better talk it over with ther rest," suggested one.

"That's it!" spoke up the third. "Who'd have thought that Captain Jerry would have got caught by any waitin' skunks like that? This is putty bad. Ther chances is that they'll hang him as sure as guns, if we don't land that box to 'em putty quick!"

"You bettee on lat!" exclaimed Hop. "Young Wild West no foolee with um Plailie Pilates."

He turned to go, but the men stopped him.

"I reckon you must go with us," they told him.

"Me go backee," Hop insisted. "He bling note; you bling um box of gold."

"You'll go with us! Do you hear that?"

"Me hear, but me no go! Me say one word and Young Wild West and um partners shootee all thlee bad Melican mans; you better walkee light along."

This had considerable effect on them.

They thought it might be possible that they were being covered by someone unseen to them, so they decided to let the Chinaman go.

"If we make up our minds to fetch the gold over we'll do it right away, or as soon as we kin git ther mules hitched ter ther wagon," said the spokesman. "Go on, yer heathen galoot! I don't know jest what ter make of yer."

"Me allee samee velly smartee," Hop retorted, as he walked swiftly for the fallen tree.

The three outlaws went back to the cave, pondering over the note that had been received.

"Where's Jerry?" asked Jack, looking at them keenly, for he could easily tell that something was wrong.

"Read this," was the reply, and the note was handed to him.

Jack gave a violent start.

"Why, that's Jerry's writin', as sure's you're born!" he exclaimed. "Where is he?"

"Jest where he writes that he is. A gang has got him. Them galoots we took that mule team from has met someone ter help 'em out, an' they have follerred us here. That smart Chinee is with 'em. It was him what brought ther note. They're camped jest ther other side of the pass out there."

The faces of the men were studies just then.

Their leader in the hands of their enemies! And unless they gave up the box of gold he would be killed!

It did not seem possible.

But there it was plain, for Jack was positive that Whistling Jerry had written the note.

"Well, boys, I s'pose we've got ter do somethin' putty quick," said Jack, who was a sort of second in command. "Jest say what yer think about it, an' say it quick."

"I tell yer what I think about it," spoke up the villain bearing the name of Hobson. "I think we'd better take all ther gold out of ther box, an' then fill ther box with stones, lock it up, an' take it over ter ther galoots. They'll think it's all right, an' they'll let Jerry go."

"Bully!" cried Jack. "We'll try that plan, an' if it don't work we'll have ter come back an' git ther gold, that's all. They'll wait till we do afore they do anything ter Jerry—that's sartin. It's ther gold what they want, an' nothin' else, 'tain't likely."

The rest were perfectly willing to do as Hobson had suggested, so they quickly proceeded to carry it out.

It so happened that Whistling Jerry had opened the box that morning, and that he had left the key in it.

The way he came to do this was because while he was looking at the glittering mass of wealth he had heard the voices of two Chinamen, instead of one, and he had hastened out to see what it meant.

Jack gave a nod of satisfaction when he saw the key in the lock.

"I was jest thinkin' that we couldn't git ther blamed box open without breakin' ther lock," he remarked. "But I see that Jerry has left ther key in it. That shows that he ain't afraid but what we're all honest."

"Yes, we're all honest men, an' there ain't no mistake about that!" spoke up one of the villains.

"Well, we wouldn't steal anything from each other, that's certain," said Hobson. "There's an old sayin' which says that there's honor among thieves."

"I hate ter be called a thief," Jack ventured. "It sounds better ter be called a pirate. We named ourselves ther Prairie Pirates, 'cause we hold up prairie schooners sometimes. We sail over ther boundless prairie, instead of ther rollin' sea. But we're pirates, jest ther same, an' mighty good ones, too!"

They all nodded at this, for it was just to their liking to hear such expressions.

"Well," said Hobson, "we'll change ther subject. Ther quicker we git ther captain away from them galoots ther better it will be. We can't very well git along without Whistlin' Jerry, fur he's a born leader, he is!"

"That's right!" several cried in unison.

But Jack said nothing.

Evidently he thought that just as good a leader as Jerry could be found, and that was himself.

However, he made no remark about it just then.

He opened the box and told the men to put the contents on a blanket.

They did this in a very short time.

"Now, go an' hitch up ther mules. If yer can't git ther blamed old wagon out from between ther trees yer'll have ter cut ther trees down," Jack said.

Hobson covered the gold with another blanket, and then they all went out.

High Low was still engaged in washing, and he paid little attention to what was going on.

It took some time to get the wagon out from the trees, but it was finally done, and then the mules were hitched to it.

The empty box was placed in it, and then the villains began carrying stones to it and filling it up.

When it was full the lid was closed, and Jack locked it. He put the key in his pocket.

"If them galoots what's got Jerry don't let him go after ther mules goes through ther brook with ther wagon, an' they see ther box in it, about ther same as it was when they seen it last, I'll miss my reckonin', that's all!" observed Jack.

"Who's goin' ter drive ther mules through?" asked Hobson.

"Nobody," was the reply. "We'll start 'em through, an' let ther galoots catch 'em when they git where they are."

"Oh, then we won't run no chance of bein' catched by them fellers."

"I reckon not. If they want ter bother with us, jest let 'em come on in here! We'll pick 'em off as fast as they come, I reckon."

"That's it!" exclaimed one. "We'll jest lay where we kin rake ther gut clean, an' if they do come through ter try an' down us we'll let daylight through 'em."

The villains were now agreed on everything concerning the move they were to make.

Jack got on the wagon and started the four mules.

The rest followed on foot.

As they neared the place where the team must enter the brook in order to get through into the gulch the other side of the narrow place, they all became somewhat uneasy.

"I reckon one of yer had better go up close there an' yell out," said Jack.

Hobson volunteered to do this.

He quickly made his way to within twenty feet of the fallen tree, and crouching behind a rock, so there was no danger of his getting shot from the pass, he called out:

"Hello!"

"Hello!" came the quick answer.

It was Young Wild West who spoke, but as Hobson did not know him, he could not recognize the voice.

"Is Captain Jerry there?" the villain asked.

"Yes!"

"Do yer mean ter stick ter your word, an' let him go, if we give yer ther box of gold?"

"Yes, that's right. I never go back on my word."

"Who are yer?"

"I am Young Wild West."

"I don't know yer."

"Well, that makes no difference. I tell you that my word is good. If you deliver the box of gold here on this side I will set your leader free. But I want you to understand one thing, though."

"What is that?"

"Well, myself and partners make a business of hunting out gangs such as you fellows have organized. You call yourself the Prairie Pirates, and we are down on all such gangs. We will undertake to break your gang up, and I guess we'll come pretty near doing it. We stand for what is right, every time, and we know how to fight a little bit, I think. But that has got nothing to do with letting your leader return to you a free man. He will do that, and then our fight will begin afterward. That is, of course, if you deliver the box of gold here."

"All right," answered Hobson. "Here comes ther mules with ther wagon hitched ter it! You'll find ther box jest as it was when we took it, fur we never moved it from ther wagon."

"I know better than that, my friend!" retorted Wild. "I was up at your cave a short time ago, and I saw the box there. Don't try to put out any lies now, for they won't go."

The Prairie Pirates looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders uneasily.

"I'll send ther mules through, I reckon," said Jack. "We'll trust ter luck. If we git Jerry with us I reckon we'll give them galoots all ther fight they want."

He got down off the wagon and then drove the mules ahead and forced them to enter the brook.

Straight for the fallen tree they went, and when the leaders were within half a dozen feet of it two of the men seized the rope that went through the pulley above, and quickly raised it.

"Git ap!" shouted Jack, and then he plied the whip upon the mules.

They started forward on a jump, and letting go the reins he stepped back to his companions.

Then an accident happened.

The wagon had become weakened when it was lodged between the trees near the cave of the villains, and the forward axle broke.

Down went the front of the wagon into the brook, and the mules came to a stop.

It was yet thirty feet to get to the edge of our friends' camp.

"That's ther best we kin do, Young Wild West!" called out Jack. "It ain't our fault if ther blamed old wagon broke down."

"All right," was the reply.

"Now you'll let Whistlin' Jerry come in here with us, I s'pose?"

"Not until I see that the gold is in the box, just as it was taken from the five men," was the reply.

Jack's face fell, and the others looked as though they were in for it.

"I reckon our little game ain't goin' ter work," he observed.

"Not much!" exclaimed Hobson. "It's got ter be a fight fur ther gold, I reckon. I hope they don't lynch Jerry, though."

"Well, if they do we can't help it," Jack retorted. "We done our best ter git him."

"Not yet we hain't. We kin fetch ther gold here, can't we?"

"Yes, but I ain't one as says ter let it go, not ter save Jerry or anyone else."

Trouble was brewing among the Prairie Pirates!

CHAPTER X.

WHISTLING JERRY WINS A TRICK IN THE GAME.

Wild was pretty sure that the villains would make a move to save their leader, and when Hop Wah came

back and reported that they would bring the box of gold over right away, providing all hands agreed to the proposition, he was confident that they would come.

When he heard them coming he waded through the pass and took a look over the fallen tree.

Our hero was quite sure that they really meant to give up the treasure when he saw it on the wagon.

But he was not to be fooled, and he meant that the box should be opened before the rope that held Whistling Jerry to the tree was cut.

When the wagon broke in the center of the pass Wild was quite certain that it was not the fault of the villains.

Then, when the conversation was over with, he set about to get the box off the wagon.

"Boys," said Wild, turning to his partners and the miners, "I guess we can cut a couple of stout poles and tie them to that box, and carry it here. Just get the mules away from the wagon, so we can have plain sailing."

All hands set to work, and the mules were soon led out and tied where they could graze.

Then they did as Wild had suggested, and in less than half an hour they had the box landed in front of the tent occupied by the male members of the party.

The girls' tent was just around an angle, and they remained in front of it, watching the work as it went on.

"I think that is mighty light gold," said Wild, as the box was set upon the ground and the ropes and poles removed from it. "It strikes me that the Prairie Pirates have taken about half of the contents out of it."

Whistling Jerry looked interested when he heard this.

It occurred to him all of a sudden that his friends had played a trick on their enemies.

"I hope they took all ther gold out of ther box," he thought. "I reckon these galoots don't intend ter let me go, anyhow. Young Wild West said he was goin' ter put up a fight agin us an' clean us out as soon as he did let me go. Now, what would he let me go if he was goin' ter do anything like that? I'll jest let 'em know that I'm a game rooster, I will!"

Having come to this conclusion, he called out to our friends:

"You galoots is a lot of liars! Yer ain't goin' ter keep yer word. There's yer box of gold! Why don't yer let me go free now?"

"Wait till we see whether the gold is in it or not," Wild answered. "If it is you shall be allowed to join your friends right away."

"An' then you'll begin ter pick us off with bullets—is that it?"

"Yes, if you don't surrender. We want to break up your gang, and you can bet that we'll do it, too!"

"That's a fine way ter do! I jest hope that there ain't a speck of gold in that old box, an' I'll gamble that there ain't, too! I'll bet all I'm worth that my pards took ther gold out an' put somethin' in ther place of it in ther box."

"We'll soon find out. I heard that you took the key from Lake when you grabbed on the treasure. Jim, just see if he has it in his pocket."

Jim came over to the tree and made a search of the villain.

But he could not find it.

"Untie him, Jim," called out Wild. "We'll undress him if it is necessary."

When they heard this the girls immediately left the scene.

But our friends were not long in finding out that the villain did not have the key.

Whistling Jerry was now very defiant and abusive.

Charlie stepped over and bound his hands behind him.

Wild looked over a bunch of keys he had, and found one that would fit the lock, which was nothing but a very common affair.

The leader of the Prairie Pirates laughed derisively as Wild lifted the lid of the box.

"I told you so!" he cried. "You've got me, but you ain't got ther gold."

Wild saw that the box was filled with stones.

Lake had kept his companions from the box, for he had a suspicion that it did not contain the gold, and he wanted them for sympathizers in case it did not.

"It ain't there, is it?" he called out to Wild.

"No," was the reply; "the galoots took out the gold and filled the box with stones."

The miner sat down and cried like a child.

Once more his hopes had been cut down with a single blow.

His four friends picked him up bodily and carried him over to the box.

"Take it easy, Lake," said Wild. "We have started in a fight for the box of gold, and we have got the box. You can bet all you are worth that we'll have the gold before the sun sets to-night! I'll guarantee it."

"Yer will, hey?" cried Whistling Jerry. "You'll never git that lot of gold! Let ther galoot whimper! He's a fool, that's what he is!"

"Charlie, just tie him to the tree again. I guess we'll make him come to terms all right."

The wretch struggled to free himself as the scout obeyed.

But he could not get away.

Lake could hardly be pacified.

He acted more like a child than anything else.

But the girls finally came around and got him straightened out a bit by assuring him over and over again that Young Wild West never made a miss of doing what he said he would do.

"See here, Lake," said Wild, when he found that the man was something like himself again, "I want you and your four men to get that wagon out of the brook and fix it up. You have got to make a new axle. When you get it done, put the empty box in the wagon. Myself and part-

ners will get the gold to put in it, or we'll have you help us carry it here."

"All right," answered the miner. "I reckon I've made a fool of myself. I'll do jest as you say. I ain't goin' ter worry no more about ther gold."

Then he started right in at the wagon, assisted by his friends.

Our hero now walked over to his sweetheart.

"Et," said he, "I want you and Anna and Eloise to stand here with your rifle ready to shoot down any men who might come through that pass. Charlie and Jim and I are going to find a way to get into the valley the other side of that rocky wall. We will take Hop with us, for he says he told the Prairie Pirates that he got there by that way. I guess we can get down there by means of our lariats. It won't hardly do for us to go through the pass here, for the villains are most likely watching at the other side."

"All right, Wild," replied Arietta. "I'll see to it that no one gets through here. There are eight of them, according to all accounts, but I guess I can fire pretty quick, and Anna and Eloise will be able to fire a shot or two, if it comes to the worst."

"Well, there is one thing that you must understand. In order for the gang on the other side to get through here they will have to pass the five men who are working with the wagon. They are armed, too, so I don't imagine that you will have much trouble about guarding the pass."

"I know that. I thought you were not counting the five miners."

"Well, they have got all they can attend to to fix up the wagon. We are going to get the gold to fill up that box."

Arietta promptly started walking up and down, her rifle ready to fire at a moment's notice.

"Come, Hop," said Wild. "I want you to go with us. Boys, get your lariats."

Charlie and Jim were eager to go.

They felt certain that the villains could not get out of the place, for Arietta alone could have downed the most of them.

She was a girl who always had her target covered before she pulled the trigger.

She had learned this from her dashing young lover.

The five men worked away at the wagon, and were just getting it in shape to move when a shot rang out.

One of them uttered a cry of pain, and came running out of the pass.

The bullet had grazed his arm.

"Ther Prairie Pirates don't mean ter let us git ther wagon out, I reckon," said Lake, as he came out, followed by the rest.

Arietta walked up close to the spot.

She got behind a rock, and then took a position so she could look through into the valley.

The tree had been lowered again, so she could not get a clear view. But it was not long before she observed the

form of a man, with a rifle in his hand, close to the rock that showed up just inside the valley.

The passage through the natural wall was not straight, but it just permitted her to look through and see the rock.

Arietta decided that it was this man who had fired the shot, so she thought she had better drive him away from his position.

Taking aim with her rifle, she pulled the trigger. Crack!

The bullet struck the rock within a few inches of the man's body, and then he disappeared.

"I guess you can go on with your work, men," said the brave girl.

"I'll watch them, and if they try any more shooting I'll show them what I can do!"

Whistling Jerry scowled fiercely when he heard this remark from the girl.

He began to realize that it would be a case of losing the game.

He had heard what our hero had said when he left the camp, and that meant that his men on the other side were going to get caught napping.

The villain made a desperate struggle to get free.

"You had better stop that sort of work," said Anna, who had her revolver in her hand, and was standing near. "You can't get loose, so you may as well make the best of it."

The villain said nothing to this, but ceased his struggles.

He began to grow dejected now.

But he was hard and fast, so no one paid any particular attention to him.

The five men were at work again by this time.

They got two of the mules hitched to the wagon, and with the axle held up by a prop that dragged on the ground when it moved, it was drawn out.

No more shots came from the other side, showing that the villains were a little careful about showing themselves.

With the wagon where they could get at it easily, the miners were able to get the measurement for a new axle and get to making it.

The tree they selected to make the axle was right close to where Whistling Jerry was tied.

One of them cut it down, and as it fell it scraped against the tree to which the villain was tied.

Though the miners did not notice it, the ropes were loosened somewhat.

They merely laughed as the tree fell, for Jerry uttered a cry, thinking he was going to be hit by it.

He felt the ropes loosen, however, and that gave the man an idea.

If he could slip the rope that held him to the tree down over his hips he would be all right, for it would drop then, and that would give him a chance to make a run for it.

His hands would still be tied behind his back, but he

figured that his captors were not the sort to shoot a helpless man, even if he was escaping from them.

While the miners were busy fashioning an axle from the tree they had cut down, Whistling Jerry was slowly working the rope down over his hips.

In about eight or ten minutes from the time he began operations he succeeded.

Then it was not long before it dropped to the ground about his ankles.

All he had to do was to step out of it, and he would have a chance to leave.

Arietta was sitting down near Anna and Eloise now.

But her eyes were turned to the passage the biggest part of the time.

When Jerry thought the proper time had come he stepped clear of the rope and made a bolt for the pass.

Splash—splash!

He was leaping along through the water in a twinkling.

“Stop!” commanded Arietta.

She had seen his move too late to draw a bead on him while facing him.

Jerry paid not the least attention to her.

Arietta did not fire.

She would not shoot at a man with his hands tied behind his back.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DUEL BETWEEN JERRY AND JACK.

After Arietta fired the shot and hit the rock the man was crouching behind the eight outlaws made up their minds that they would have to be a bit careful what they did.

The fellow got back out of the way in a hurry.

“I reckon we’re in what yer might call a bad box,” said Hobson.

Jack sat on the ground a short distance away, talking earnestly to three of the men.

Hobson knew what he was up to, and he opposed him.

Jack wanted to become leader of the Prairie Pirates.

Hobson wanted to save Whistling Jerry, and have him to lead them.

The two were dead against each other on that point.

And it just happened that of the other six men, three sided with Hobson and three with Jack.

The villains never had the least idea that anyone could get into the valley by any other way, so they remained right where they were, determined to shoot down their foes if they came through.

What was their surprise when they saw their leader come running through the brook with his hands tied behind him!

And as not a shot was fired at him, they thought that he must have been given his liberty.

“Here we are, Jerry!” cried Hobson, waving his hat excitedly.

Jerry uttered an answering cry, and made direct for them.

“Cut me loose, boys!” he painted. “I never thought I’d git away, but I did. We’ve got ter look out, I kin tell yer! Young Wild West an’ his pards has gone ter try an’ find another way ter git in here. If they should find a way it’ll be all up with us, ‘cause they kin shoot so straight they won’t miss when they draw a bead on us.”

“They can’t find a way ter git in here,” retorted Hobson. “That’s a sure thing!”

“Don’t yer believe that. They took their lariats with ‘em.”

Jerry began to whistle.

Everybody laughed but Jack.

The leader noticed it right away.

He ceased whistling, and looking at Jack angrily said: “Why don’t yer laugh?”

“I reckon there’s other things ter do besides laughin’ jest now.”

“Oh, yer do, hey?”

“Don’t yer think so yerself?”

“When I whistle everybody laughs.”

“Well, I ain’t goin’ ter laugh, ‘cause I don’t feel like it.” Jerry had no weapons on his person, but he reached over and took a shooter from the belt of Hobson.

“You’ve got ter laugh, Jack!” he exclaimed. “I mean what I say! It’s a rule I’ve made, an’ I ain’t goin’ ter allow it ter be broke.”

Jack stepped quickly behind a rock.

He was standing less than ten feet from Jerry, and it was evident that he was ready for a fight.

“Show yourself, Jack!” cried the leader, stepping around to get at him.

“You had better look out,” was the reply. “I ain’t done nothin’ ter be shot fur, an’ I’m goin’ ter defend myself, Jerry. I kin shoot as good as you kin, yer know.”

“Go ahead an’ shoot!” was the reply.

Crack!

Jerry fired as the words left his mouth, for he had caught a glimpse of his man.

But the bullet missed by two or three inches.

Crack!

Jack fired and the bullet grazed the sleeve of the leader’s shirt.

The rest of the gang scattered and got out of the way. Hobson was getting ready to take a hand in the game, though.

He considered that Jack was a traitor, and he decided that the best thing to happen to him was to get shot.

He was watching his chance to get a shot at him, as he dodged behind the rock to keep out of range of the captain.

He had his rifle in his hand, and it was evident that he was going to make a clean job of it when he fired.

But the three men who had agreed to stick to Jack were not going to allow anything like this to happen.

One of them stepped over and took hold of Hobson’s rifle.

"Don't do it!" he said. "Jack is goin' ter have a square deal. It's Jerry's an' Jack's fight; let 'em have it out."

"I don't know as you've got any right ter interfere," retorted Hobson, scowling at the man.

"I've got as much right ter interfere as you have," was the retort.

Crack!

Just then Jerry thought he had a good chance, and he fired again.

But a mocking laugh from Jack was the result.

It was a peculiar sort of duel that the two men were engaged in.

They kept on going around the rock, pausing now and then, and sometimes reversing the direction they were moving in.

Meanwhile Hobson and the man who had stopped him from firing a cowardly shot at Jack were having a heated argument.

The other two friends of Jack took sides with the man.

The three remaining ones seemed inclined to stick to the leader and Hobson.

Hobson was not slow to see that he had three against him, so he gradually cooled down.

Crack!

Jack fired just then, and an oath came from the lips of the leader.

He had been touched by the bullet.

But it was only a scratch, and he was resolved, more than ever, to settle Jack.

"You're a goner, Jack," he exclaimed. "I never thought you'd go back on me. You've got ter die!"

"I reckon my chance is as good as yours, Whistlin' Jerry!" was the retort. "It's either me or you what's got ter go under, an' yer kin bet that I'm dead game! I ain't afraid of you, an' I never was. This laughin' when you whistle is more like child's play than anything else, an' I've been gittin' tired of it right along. If there's some of ther gang what likes it they kin keep on laughin', but I reckon they won't laugh when you whistle much more!"

Crack!

Jerry showed himself a little too much again, and Jack fired.

But the bullet simply put a hole through the sleeve of his shirt.

Crack!

Jerry fired wildly.

The queer duel could not last much longer, though, for the men were exhausting their ammunition.

Jack seemed to realize this first.

He found he had but two shots left, and he meant to save them until he could make them tell.

He took off his hat and placed it on the muzzle of his revolver.

Then he pushed it around a corner of the rock.

Crack!

A bullet went through it.

"Ow-wow!" yelled Jack, as though he had been hit.

Then he pushed out the hat again.

Crack!

The ruse worked, for Jerry fired again.

Jerry had only one shot left now.

But he did not know it.

He was so excited in what he was doing that he never once thought of how many times he was firing.

The rest of the villains stood looking on at a safe distance.

"There's one thing," said Hobson, "if Jack drops ther captain I'll drop him!"

"No, yer won't!" cried the man who had taken Jack's part.

Crack!

Just then Jerry fired his last shot.

His foe was not sure that it was the last one, however, and he was just as cautious as ever.

They kept it up for five minutes longer, and then Jerry pulled the trigger of his weapon again.

There was only a sharp click this time.

"Boys," he called out, "I've shot all my cartridges, an' I ain't got none on me. Chuck me another shooter—quick!"

"Here yer go, Jerry!" and Hobson pulled another revolver from his belt and made a move to toss it over to the rock.

But his arm was struck by the man who had been opposing him right along, and the weapon did not go where it was intended for.

Jack now rushed around the rock and caught his man.

Jerry's face was very pale, and it was evident that he knew he had done all he could.

Jack's revolver was leveled at his heart, so he sank to the ground.

"Call it quits, Jack," he said. "I won't ask yer ter laugh when I whistle any more."

"All right, then. Git up! I ain't goin' ter shoot at yer when yer ain't got no chance ter shoot back."

The leader of the Prairie Pirates got up and walked over to the group standing near by.

"Boys," said he, "I reckon we'd better git together an' look fur Young Wild West."

"All right," answered Jack, as he refilled the chambers of his revolver with fresh cartridges. "Come on! We'll drop our little argument until we have settled with our enemies. Them galoots ain't goin' ter git that gold, an' that's all there is ter it."

"Some of yer had better stay here ter keep 'em from comin' in this way," advised Hobson.

"All right. You pick three of ther men ter stay here with yer," replied Jerry.

Hobson, of course, picked the three who had been favorable to him.

Then the others set out for the cave.

When they came to it they saw that the blanket was not covering the heap of gold, and that more than half of it was gone!

"What in thunder does this mean?" cried Whistling Jerry.

"That's more'n I kin tell," retorted Jack. "But yer said as how Young Wild West an' his pards had gone out ter lower themselves down in ther valley; maybe they hev done it, an' it was them as has been takin' away ther gold."

"I guess you have got that just right!"

Out from behind a pile of rubbish stepped Young Wild West, a revolver in either hand!

The villains started back in consternation.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

When Wild and his partners set out with Hop they felt pretty certain that they could manage to get into the little valley.

"Hop," said our hero, "I want you to take us to the spot you told the men in there that you dropped from."

"Allee light," answered the Chinaman. "Lat light ovee lis way."

They had no little difficulty in climbing to the top of the ridge, for it was in anything but a smooth state.

Sharp rocks were there to cut them should they slip, and the bushes pulled out by the roots when they caught hold of them for support.

But our friends were of the persistent sort, and pulling Hop along, they at last reached a place where there was good footing.

On the outside of the ridge the cliffs were so steep that it would have been impossible for anyone to get up from there.

The pines and stunted oaks afforded them plenty of chance to keep out of view of the villains, and they made their way along until they heard the voices below.

They listened a while, and then went on along the ridge.

It took them fully fifteen minutes to make the distance, for they were forced to swing themselves across in some places where the crags projected up.

At last they came to the spot that Hop had declared that he came from when he entered the valley.

Wild measured the distance with his eye to the level below, and figured that two lariats tied together would just about do the trick.

He quickly made the end of one of them fast to a rock, and then tied another fast to the other end of it.

Then he let it down and found it would reach to a place where good footing could be obtained.

It was just then that the duel between Jerry and Jack started in.

Our friends had heard a couple of shots before that, but they did not think much of it, for they were confident that the scoundrels would not try to venture out of the valley.

Wild was the first to slide down the rope.

He motioned for Hop to come next, and he did so.

Then Jim and Charlie came down.

"I reckon there's somethin' goin' on over there," re-

marked the scout, nodding in the direction they had come from.

"Yes. I guess we had better see what it is," answered Wild.

They all made for a spot from which they might get a view of what was going on.

"Ther galoot of a Whistlin' Jerry is there!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie.

"That's right," answered Wild. "I can't understand how he got away."

"He is fighting a duel with one of his own men, it seems," remarked Jim. "No matter how he got away, he is there!"

"Well, we came here for a purpose, so we won't try to investigate now," said Wild. "It must have been that he slipped the knots, Charlie."

"I tied him to ther tree," was the reply. "I never tie knots what kin be slipped."

"I know you don't. But never mind. Let's get over to the cave. The whole nine villains are there, so we know that the girls are all right on the other side. Come on! We'll go for that gold now!"

They made straight for the cave and soon came in sight of the Chinaman.

He was taking things easy, smoking a pipe with a very long stem, and when he saw him Hop grinned.

Our hero soon saw that it was impossible to get into the cave without being seen by the Chinaman.

"Hop," said he, "you go and tell that galoot that he has got to do just as we tell him or he'll be a dead Chinaman. He has got to get in and help us. Make him understand it, too!"

Hop grinned and nodded.

Then he started boldly for High Low.

He was not seen by him until he was within a dozen feet of him.

High Low jumped to his feet and looked frightened.

Then Hop proceeded to get in his work.

He held a short conversation in Chinese with the heathen, and then called out for Wild and his partners to come on.

High Low seemed perfectly willing to aid them all he could, though it was plain that he was very much frightened.

They lost no time in going into the cave.

"We want something to put this in," said Wild, pointing to the heap of gold.

High Low promptly brought forth three leather mail bags that the Prairie Pirates had taken from some stagecoach on one of their raids.

"Just the thing!" exclaimed the dashing young dead-shot. "Now, boys, just put what a man can conveniently carry in each of them and we'll take the gold away that way. We'll take it down as close to the entrance as we possibly can."

They were not long in getting away with the first three bags.

These were dumped in a good place, and then they came back for more.

Another load was taken, and then, just as they were going to take the third lot, Jim reported that five of the villains were coming toward the cave.

Wild called High Low over to him.

"You go out there, and when your friends come just take down the clothes from the line as though nothing was wrong. If they ask you if anyone has been here tell them no. Do you understand?"

"Me undelstand," was the reply.

"Well, if you don't do as I say you will be a dead Chinaman, that's all!"

High Low did do as he was told, as is already known.

It was a neat little surprise that Young Wild West had prepared for the five Prairie Pirates, and when he stepped before them it was a clear case of surrender or die fighting for them.

But Whistling Jerry was not going to surrender.

He jumped back as soon as he could recover from his surprise, and whipped out a revolver.

Crack!

He fired a shot, but Wild dropped in time to escape it.

Then the others began shooting, backing out of the cave as they did so.

Wild, Charlie and Jim returned the fire, for there was nothing else to do.

Two of the villains dropped, and a third hopped away with a bullet in the calf of his leg.

"This is the finish of the fight for the box of gold, boys!" our hero cried. "If they want fight, give it to them!"

They rushed out of the cave, running the risk of being shot, for they were now bent on finishing it in a hurry.

Jerry and Jack threw up their hands when they saw they had no chance.

The wounded man was sitting on the ground.

"So you've got enough, have you?" asked Wild, as he walked up to them.

"Say," said Jack, "if you don't mind, me an' Jerry will fight out our grudge."

"Well, I can hardly refuse such a request. Go ahead!"

"We'll step away ten paces, an' then, when you say ther word, we'll begin ter shoot at each other."

"All right. Go at it."

Whistling Jerry was perfectly willing, so they promptly turned and walked away from each other.

When they had counted ten paces they slowly turned around.

"Let yourselves go!" cried Young Wild West.

Crack!

Crack!

Jerry staggered as the first report rang out, for it was Jack who proved to be the quickest.

But he fired just the same, and down went Jack in a heap.

The leader of the Prairie Pirates tried hard to keep on

his feet, but the bullet had found a vital part and he sank to the ground.

Jack had been killed instantly, the bullet going through his right eye into the brain.

Jerry expired before anything could be done for him, so that ended the grudge between the two villains.

The wounded man was disarmed, and then, leaving Hop, and High Low with him, our three friends made for the entrance of the valley to settle with the rest of the Prairie Pirates.

They were not long in getting there.

"Get ready for hot lead!" he shouted as they rushed up. "We are going to have that box of gold, so you may as well make up your minds to it!"

Hobson dodged behind a rock and fired a shot at them. The others ran for cover, firing as they went.

Charlie dropped one of them in a hurry, and that ended it.

"We surrender!" cried Hobson, coming out into view, his hands over his head.

They were disarmed and bound in short order.

Then Jim ran to the brook and shouted:

"It is all over! We have fought and won! The box of gold is yours again, Lake. You can take it through to Omaha with your mules now."

There is not much more to add.

Suffice it to say that the gold was brought to the wagon in due time and put in the box.

The prisoners were placed in the wagon, too, when they set out the next morning, and in due time they were placed in the custody of a sheriff who wanted them badly.

Wild and his companions were so much interested in the box of gold that they went on to Omaha with Lake and his friends.

To say that the returning miner met with a royal reception would be putting it too mild.

There was a great time among his relatives and friends and Young Wild West was put down as the lion of the occasion.

At the reception which was given Wild and Arietta led the march.

But Young Wild West and his friends did not stay long in the city of Omaha.

There were stirring times ahead for them, as will be seen in the next number of this weekly.

THE END.

Read "YOUNG WILD WEST DARING DEATH; OR, HOW THE SORREL SAVED ARIETTA," which will be the next number (210) of "Wild West Weekly."

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